COWBOY-LIFE ROMANCES

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Lariat

STORY MAGAZINE

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

GUNSMOKE GAL OF NIGHT-HAWK RANGE by JOHN STARR

"The Romance of the West —Written with Action"

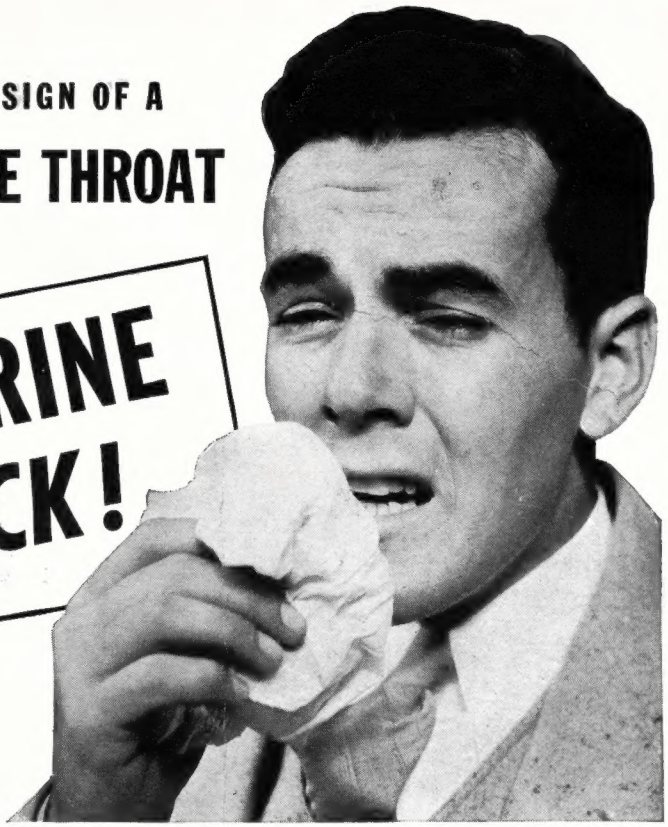
PAYOFF IN MEX!
A SMASHING NOVEL OF THE BORDER
by
WALT COBURN

GREENHORN-POISON FOR THE LOBO PLAGUE
A SIX-GUN NOVELET by
DEE LINFORD

AT THE FIRST SIGN OF A

COLD OR SORE THROAT

LISTERINE -QUICK!



In clinical tests over a 10-year period, Listerine users had fewer colds and milder colds than non-users.

Often the prompt and frequent use of Listerine Antiseptic helps old Mother Nature to combat a cold before it becomes serious.

Here's one reason why, we believe.

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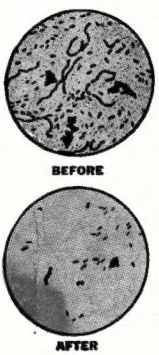
So, when you feel a cold coming on, gargle with full strength Listerine Antiseptic—quick and often. You may save yourself a long siege of trouble. Lambert Pharmacal Co.



NOTE HOW LISTERINE GARGLE REDUCED GERMS

The two drawings illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

This is a magazine of fiction; the characters named and happenings described do not refer to any actual person. The publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited mss.

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

Lariat
STORY MAGAZINE

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

TWO BIG WESTERN NOVELS

GREENHORN POISON FOR THE LOBO PLAGUE . . . **Dee Linford** 3

Jim Flood had to choose: He had to chuck his carefully-laid plans to ruin Sam Dancey —or let the gold-camp king's lovely daughter die in his vengeance trap.

PAYOFF IN MEX . . . . . **Walt Coburn** 86

A hundred a month and cartridges free! The Circle-C hired 'em rough, tough and nasty, for in that strip below the Rio the deck was stacked and the take was Death.

A NOVELET OF THE RANGE

GUNSMOKE GAL OF NIGHTHAWK RANGE . . . . **John Starr** 46

Law lead blocked the boogery Texan's backtrail, while ahead, his way was barred by the cold-eyed, two-gun queen of that death-scarred Nighthawk spread.

FOUR FAST SHORT STORIES

TRIGGER FEVER . . . . . **John G. Pearsol** 29

He left Limpia a pint-sized gun-kid. Now he was back for tally with man-size irons.

THE COYOTE KID . . . . . **Art Lawson** 37

Three hands reached for the deck—high-card hombre to pull a buskwack trigger.

THE CANYON OF WANTED MEN . . . . . **Francis James** 67

In the canyon of wanted men, the law and the lawless made strange truce.

HELLFIRE HOMBRE . . . . . **Tom J. Hopkins** 77

The gun-lobos of that salty Lost Hills range plugged sheriffs for fun.

THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

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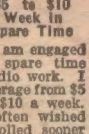

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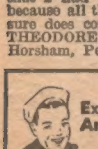

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GREENHORN POISON
for the
LOBO PLAGUE
BY
DEE LINFORD

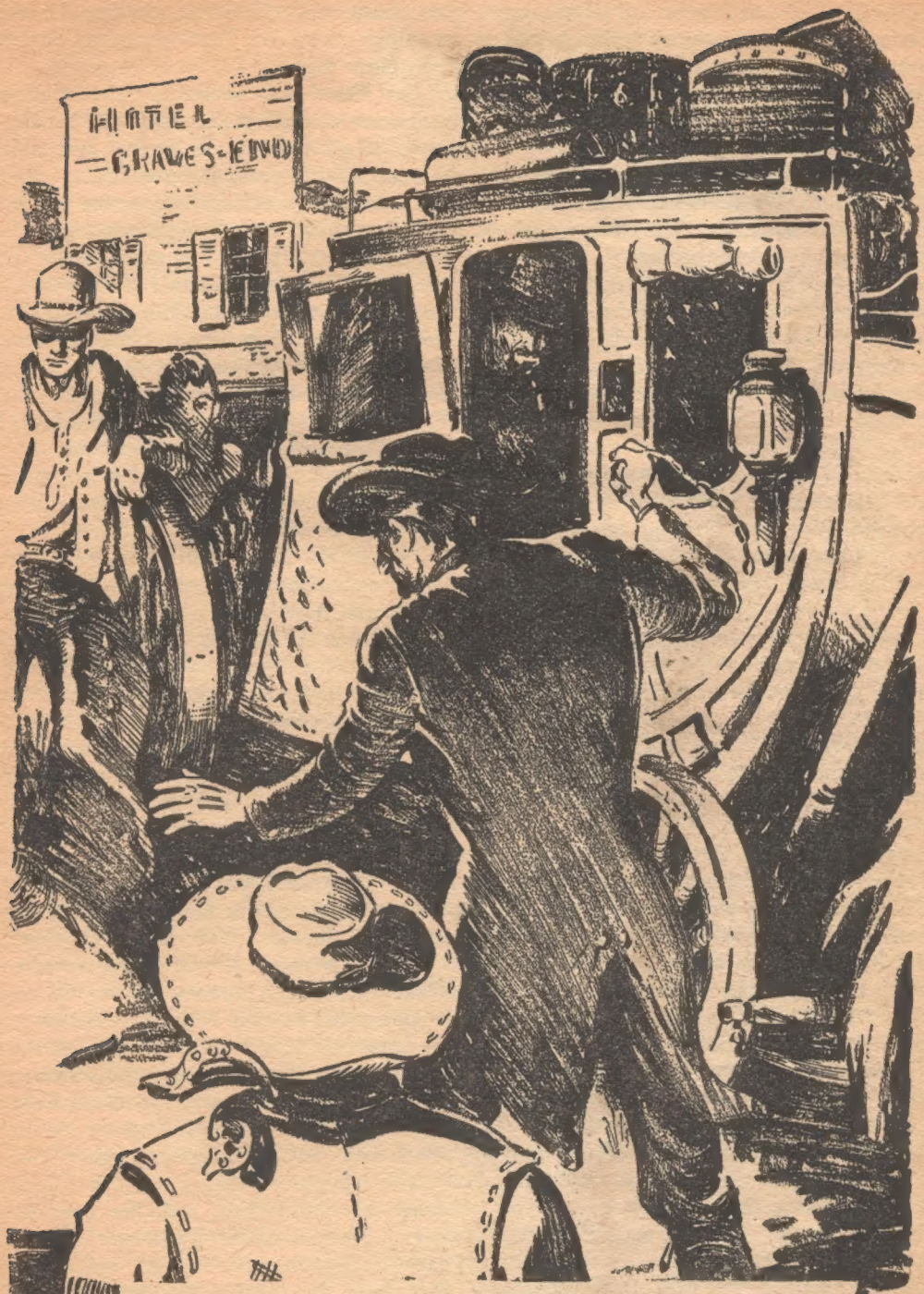
GREENHORN POISON *for the* LOBO PLAGUE

by

DEE LINFORD

JIM FLOOD was drunk when he boarded the Rozet stage in Blind Bull Gulch. Drunk on rancorous hate for the man who'd killed his father and brought ruin to Hungry Valley and Jim Flood's way of living.

For two months in the mountain stronghold of Wash Logan's Avenger crew, Jim Flood had plotted his revenge and fed on



For a year Jim Flood laid his plans to ruin hated Sam Dancey, boss of that booming gold range. And now, because of a wilful girl's foolish whim, he must call back his bet—or let Lisbeth Dancey perish in his vengeance trap.

his hate as the turkey buzzard feeds upon carrion. It was a dryness in his mouth, a burning inside his head, a tightness in his throat when he breathed. And every emotion inside his hard, lean body was conditioned by it.

For two long months Jim Flood had doted upon Wash Logan's cleverly-conceived plan to strike Sam Dancey where that crooked mining promoter was most vulnerable—in the pocketbook. But now, when zero hour had arrived in that holdup plot, Jim felt none of the elation he had anticipated. There was in him only a sullen impatience to get the robbery over with in order that he might prepare the next blow. For it was his plan to strike again and again, until Dancey was beaten and broken. Then, when the promoter was crawling and begging for calf rope, Jim Flood would shove his gun into the mining man's sagging stomach, and shoot him down—as Dancey had shot old Dan Flood, almost a year ago.

Jim Flood was alone in the Rozet treasure coach, alone with his savage hate and the heavy boxes of crated dust and nuggets from Dancey's placer diggings. He could hear the driver and the cross-eyed shotgun guard conversing up on the box, and his lips tightened in the faintest shadow of a smile. They were fools—blind fools, riding to disaster like ants on a chip. They didn't know that their only passenger was old Dan Flood's own son. And they didn't suspect that he had been busy about their coach during the noon stop, while they were inside the station kitchen, feeding their faces. They didn't know that Jim had removed the pin from their wheel doubletrees and substituted another bolt which was cut almost in two with a flat file—that he'd sawed the wheel tongue three-fourths in two as well, just behind the polecap at the end.

Those two bohunks sat upon their coach, talking and spitting and never dreaming that as quick as the road grade steepened sufficiently, the doubletree pin would break and the entire weight of their heavy cargo would be hurled against the weakened tongue. They didn't know that the tongue would snap then and turn the coach loose upon that steep, narrow-dug road. They didn't dream that Wash Logan and his riders were hunkered down the gorge below them at the moment, waiting for the monthly take from Dancey's mines to fall into their laps.

Jim Flood was seated by the window that opened against the bank of the dugway. He'd insisted on having that seat, because he'd have to jump to safety when the coach had cut loose from the horses. But he could see through the opposite window, down into the purple depths of the gorge, and he calculated how much of the old stagecoach would be found down there, a mile below, when it was all over. Even the heavy, iron-braced ore boxes would be burst open by such a fall. But Wash Logan could scrape up enough of the yellow curse to satisfy his riders.

Jim Flood didn't care about the gold. His revenge would be his reward. That was understood.

Jim Flood leaned out the window to check on the nearness of the approaching posse, and he slid the old wooden-gripped Peacemaker Colts' .45 from the holster under his shoulder. Wash Logan had told him that a posse likely would meet the coach somewhere in the gorge, as a matter of form. But Jim was taking no unnecessary chances, where the law was concerned.

The posse was nearer than he'd expected, and he pulled back inside the old box. "Howdy boys!" the driver yelled, addressing the nearer horsemen in the long cavalcade ahead. "This here a holdup?"

"H'llo, Johnny," a crisp, nasal voice replied. "Dancey's spooky about his dust shipment again. He asked the sheriff and us boys to ride out an' meet you, so's we could watch you, an' you could watch us, an' all of us could watch for Wash Logan an' his robbers. Sam don't trust no man these days, an' can't say as I blame him."

The speaker came into Jim Flood's range of vision then, and Jim eyed him over. He was about Jim's own size and age—twenty-five or six at the outside. But there the parallel between them ended sharply. Jim Flood was rough-hewn and rugged as the red rock breaks that jutted from the shoulder of Hungry Mountain ahead. He was long and loose-jointed and small-hipped, from much riding. He was not exactly handsome, in his dirty, worn clothing and months-old beard. But, dirt and beard and all, there

was something about him that was trim and distinctive and balanced, like the lines of a blooded horse.

The other was Jim Flood's opposite in every respect. A six-footer with a clean-cut wedge physique, he was suave and smooth and handsome—in a specious, townsman's way. He was gotten out with much personal attention in a long-tailed black coat, tight-fitting peg-bottom trousers, and flat-heeled boots. A heavy gold chain spanned his brocaded vest, and a brown beaver churn hat rode his curly head. His deep-set greeny eyes seemed to dance and to freeze by turns, and the short, toothbrush mustache beneath his nose twitched as he spoke.

Jim Flood had never seen Brule Fontaine before, but he had heard of Sam Dancey's high-powered mining expert, and he couldn't mistake him, now.

Jim had crossed his legs over his pistol, and, seeing that the possemen were not onto the setup, he sat back to enjoy the prospect of a treasure coach being robbed and destroyed under the very guns of twenty-four heavily armed guards, and the posse helpless to do anything about it.

Jim Flood's rumination was short-lived, however. Another horse moved in alongside the coach, and the stage rolled to a stop. Jim's hand tightened on the butt of his gun, but then he saw this rider was a woman—a girl—with bright bay hair and chestnut eyes and a full red mouth that looked very nice when it smiled, as it was doing now. Her hair was piled and looped high in front, and the little plumed hat she wore gave the delicate oval of her face an elfin quality that recalled pictures in old books Jim Flood had read.

The girl rode a sidesaddle, and two inches of one daintily stockinged leg were exposed inadvertently to the eyes of men. Jim had an eye for such details as this, but his gaze was not protracted, his attention not sustained. Jim Flood's obsession to kill a man he'd never seen did not permit sustained attention to anything else.

"Hello boys!"

The girl addressed the men on the coach box, and Jim Flood, for all his preoccupation, couldn't fail to notice the clear, piping flute notes in her voice. And then the girl turned to Brule Fontaine. "I'm a fine posseman, Brule," she said. "Next time, you'll make me stay home. My horse has gone lame. I'll have to ride the stage back to town."

The girl's soft-spoken announcement brought Jim Flood erect on the seat. It had never occurred to him, as he plotted against Sam Dancey, that innocent persons might be caught in the coils of his hate before he were finished with it. He'd never considered the possibility that the time might come when he'd have to abandon his vengeance or bring hurt and destruction to people who had never harmed him, and he wasn't prepared to make that choice now. The knowledge that he *must* make it, now, before the girl boarded the doomed coach, threw his thinking into confusion and blurred the issues at stake.

BUT even as Jim Flood struggled to untangle thought and emotion and make his decision, the matter was taken out of his hands. Brule Fontaine had jumped from his horse, and was bowing, handsomely, before the girl.

"You need never offer a kingdom for a horse, Lisbeth," he exclaimed, gallantly. "Why, one smile from you could command all the horses in the territory, including my own Sergeant Swimme. One smile, Lisbeth, and you may ride my horse. And I shall ride the coach."

The girl slid from her saddle and favored the glib-tongued ladies' man with the smile he requested. But, even as Jim Flood was wondering through his immense relief how it would be to be smiled at like that, she declined the offer.

"You are too *gallant* with the ladies, Brule," she said, teasing the man with her eyes. "I should never trust you as a husband. Thanks—but *I* shall ride the coach."

She started toward the rickety old stage, singularly graceful of movement, but Fontaine reached out a hand and stopped her. "I couldn't permit it," he said. His voice was properly deferential, but it harbored a quiet determination that left Jim Flood wondering. "I must insist, Lisbeth, that you ride my horse."

The girl stiffened and looked at the man with surprise and defiance and a mild contempt. She reached up with one small white-gloved hand and removed his hand from her arm.

"Who are you," she asked coolly, "To order me about?"

"Order you? *You,* Lisbeth?" Fontaine simulated a good-humored smile. "Why, I wouldn't dream of trying!" His eyes, however, were not in his smile. They had turned suddenly hard and contemplative, as if curtained and veiled before, they had opened unexpectedly upon his real self. Those eyes settled on Jim Flood through the open window, and the curtains were lowered once more.

"The coach is overloaded now, and the only seat is occupied," he said quickly, as if inspired. "The man in there wouldn't, I think, enjoy your company—nor you his, I'm sure."

Jim Flood was too engrossed in his predicament to take any notice of the slur in the engineer's reference to him. He was watching the girl, wondering what she would do. And he soon learned.

"I appreciate your concern, Mister Fontaine," she said lightly, "But I shall be careful not to annoy the—the—" she looked toward Jim for the first time and seemed at a loss for the word to describe him—"the gentleman," she finished, tentatively. And Jim watched her approaching, knowing that he had to stop her before she boarded the stage. He could, however, think of nothing to say. His shirt was damp against his body, and his hidden hand was wet against the grips of his gun.

"The Mick there is right, Miss," he blurted, when he could postpone speaking no longer. "You better ride the horse!"

Jim Flood could have bitten off his tongue for making such a speech. But he could think of nothing better to say. The girl stopped short in the coach doorway, and gazed at him, inquiringly, and with faintly amused interest. She might have been examining an animal specimen from another planet.

"Are you so dangerous," she inquired, sweetly, "that women are in peril, riding in the same coach with you in broad daylight?"

Jim Flood dropped his eyes, and his retreat seemed to anger her. "Mister Driver," she appealed archly, "May I not ride my own father's coach into Rozet?"

My own father's coach! Those words dropped like chunks of molten lead into Jim Flood's consciousness, robbing him of all power to think. This bay-thatched girl who insisted on being killed was Sam Dancey's own daughter!

The driver dropped promptly to the ground, his long mule whip coiled in his hand. "We'll make room for you in there pronto, Miss Dancey," he growled. "An' we'll be right proud to have yu'." He shook his whip at Brule Fontaine, and the mining engineer stepped back. He glanced irately at Jim. "This jaybird here is drunk, or he'd not be layin' tongue to a lady like yerself. You jus' climb in, right over here, Miss Lisbeth, an' if that pot-walloper there pesters you any more, why you jus' holler up, an' by Gawd, excuse me, miss, I'll git down an' hide the back off'n him with this whip!"

Sam Dancey's monthly dust shipment out of Blind Bull Gulch had grown so large that it could no longer be transported to the railroad at Rozet upon the customary carrier platform above the rear axle. The heavy crated boxes filled most of the coach's interior now, and there was room for only one paying passenger on gold shipment days. Jim Flood had counted on that fact to keep outsiders from getting hurt when the coach was wrecked. But now the grunting driver rearranged the boxes to make a seat for the girl. And Jim watched in hypnotized silence while he piled the boxes back up around her—walling her in until she'd never be able to get out.

Brule Fontaine stood watching also, through the coach window, and his green eyes were so hard and bright that Jim wondered if he could know of the fate in store for that treasure coach. But he rejected the thought as quick as it occurred. If Fontaine knew of the plot, he would have no reason for keeping it a secret. He would have Jim Flood in irons by now.

The engineer turned his eyes on Jim then, and in them he read a command, and a lethal threat. Jim could fathom the meaning of neither one, and bewilderment mounted inside him.

The driver glowered threateningly at Jim before leaving the box. Then he climbed back to his seat. Harness rattled as he gathered his lines. His whip cracked and the three span of horses hit their collars. The doomed coach rolled again, and Jim Flood slumped back in his seat. The

shock of the latest turn of events was wearing off, and a sullen anger was awakening inside him. He was faced now with the alternative of killing a girl who'd never harmed him, or of throwing away everything and betraying the only friends he had left in the world. It was a hard choice, and he shrank from making it. Instead, he took refuge in anger, and cursed his consistently bad luck.

His oath was whispered, but the girl raised her head and looked at him across the heap of boxes between them.

"Do you find it bad as that, riding in the same coach with me?" she asked.

Jim Flood was seeing for the first time the luminous green-blue pigments in her hazel eyes—the fine dusting of freckles that covered her nose. Lisbeth Dancey. The name sounded Irish. Jim himself was Irish. But that didn't mean anything. It *couldn't* mean anything, now.

Her question penetrated the fog that enveloped his mind, at length, and the fog evaporated, momentarily. For the instant, Jim Flood, sworn murderer, was just another girl-shy cowboy abashed at having profaned in the hearing of a lady.

He started to apologize, but the girl cut him off, her eyes lighting with amusement and pleasure at seeing him flush. "You needn't be sorry for that. I have been around the gold diggings with my father for nearly a year, and I'm accustomed to hearing men—talk. I do believe in women's rights, but I'm convinced that if we ever try denying men the right of swearing, we suffragettes will get in trouble."

THERE had been two kinds of women in Jim Flood's life—the one as common as mud on a cowboy's boots, and the other rarer than the gold that sent men loco and brought ruin to a cow country. Jim knew both types well, and he didn't mistake the girl in the coach with him. She was forward, and willing to be his friend. But there was no guile, no brazen invitation in her friendliness. She had no fish to fry. And before Jim was aware of it, he was smiling with her, and feeling better than he'd felt ever since news of his father's death had transformed him into a bitter and brooding man.

The coach shuddered as the wheels lurched into a chock, and the smile faded from Jim Flood's face. He stared at Lisbeth Dancey, recalling suddenly the fate to which he had abandoned her, and the burning intentness of his look made her retreat once more behind her ore-box barricade.

Jim Flood, no longer hypnotized by the lovely vision of her, could think clearly once more. He knew that he couldn't save her. For to warn her now would be to throw away two months of careful, painstaking plotting. It would be to betray himself and Wash Logan and Logan's loyal riders into the hands of a vengeful, spiteful law. It was the life of this skylarking girl against the lives of twenty others—against the life of an entire valley.

Jim had tried to warn her. He'd tried to keep her from boarding the coach. But she hadn't listened. She'd had her own way, just as she always had, likely. She'd brought this fate upon herself. Anyhow, Sam Dancey had killed Jim's father. And this girl was Sam Dancey's flesh.

An eye for eye. That was the way Jim Flood saw it. Blood for blood!

And even as he told himself this, he was noting how much the grade of the road had steepened, and praying desperately that the doubletree pin wouldn't break. There was still a chance that it would hold. And if it did, there would be no wreck. Then this girl wouldn't be harmed, and Jim wouldn't be selling out on Wash or himself, either.

But even as he grasped at the slender hope, he felt the tremor run through the coach. He knew the pin had given away, and he heard the doubletrees hit the ground. He heard the sharp, gun-like report as the weakened trail tongue snapped under the weight of the heavy gold cargo. He heard the driver rattle the useless brake lever frantically, and his sharp oath as the lead lines jerked him swiftly off the box.

Then the coach was rolling backward, out of control.

Jim Flood saw the ground rush past his window as the old box-on-wheels gained speed. He heard the startled yell of the shotgun guard as that man jumped to safety.

"Jump!" he told the girl harshly. "This way!"

Startled and bewildered by realization of her predicament, the girl tried to climb over the box barricade. But the coach wheels lurched crazily against the deep, hard road ruts, and the old box bucked violently on its leather sling springs. An ore container toppled over upon her. She caught it with her hands, but it was too heavy for her slender arms. The most she could do was to ease it to the floor.

"I can't move," she whispered, and her lips curled like those of a child who is about to cry. "The box is on my foot."

The maddening thing about it was that she looked at Jim as if she expected him to do something about it. And there was nothing he could do. He couldn't even get to her, not without moving a dozen of the small, heavy dust boxes. And there was no time to do that.

For some part of a second, Jim Flood stood paralyzed. Then he saw that a sharp turn was rushing up the grade toward them. He knew that when the coach reached that bend, it would leave the ruts and go over the edge of the dug road, backward. It would turn end over end, slowly, in space. It would be smashed to kindling on the rocks, five thousand feet below.

Fear gripped at Flood's stomach with icy tongs. He could never get the girl out, in time. If he hesitated any longer, he would go over the edge himself. And Jim Flood, looking at death squarely, knew suddenly a desperate desire to live. He *had* to live, at least until he'd squared his account with Sam Dancey. And he couldn't help the girl, standing there.

He wrenched his eyes from Lisbeth Dancey's mute, terrified and pleading gaze. He kicked the door open, and jumped.

II

JIM FLOOD landed on his feet, running. But he couldn't keep pace with the fast-rolling stagecoach. The windows drew away from him, then the deserted driver's seat, and, finally the mail boot and the front gears. But when the trailing tongue began to slither past him, he launched himself upon it in a wild bulldogging lunge. His fingers curled around the rough fracture at the end, and made themselves fast there.

Jim Flood was hands down the best bulldogger in Hungry Valley, and his talent stood him well now. With the runaway coach dragging him faster than he could ever have run, he kept his hold on the end of the tongue and worked his feet around in front of him, and under him. He braced them far enough in head that his knees wouldn't buckle and throw him to his face, and skied over that rough ground, fighting the tongue and trying to cramp it in against the hill, hoping thereby to throw the back-rolling coach in against the dug bank to stop it.

It wouldn't have been difficult to turn the backing vehicle by the tongue, had the road been smooth. But the ruts had been cut so deep during the spring rains that one man's strength couldn't turn the heavy wheels out of them. And Jim was snapped about on the end of the pole like the popper at the end of the driver's whip.

Once the end of the tongue jarred in against his ribs, and he felt bone crunch under the impact. But he held on grimly, fighting the pole with every ounce of his diminishing strength.

Dizzy from the punishment and covered with dust and gravel, still be hung desperately to the jolting pole. His nose and mouth were bleeding, his boot soles were hot and wearing through against the ground, and his hands were raw chunks of quick, throbbing flesh. His breathing became a hoarse sobbing, and his lungs were bursting.

One front wheel struck a deep chock then, and Jim was flipped out over the edge of the abyss that yawned at the edge of the road. In the second that he hung there, he looked down into the broken wilderness of stone a mile below him. He thought the coach was going over, and he went sick, with the gorge gyrating below him. But the fellies slipped back into the ruts, and he was popped back onto the rocky roadway with a bone-crushing jolt that almost broke his hold on the tongue.

When he hit the road shelf again, he found himself up an arm's length along the tongue. And he saw that the bend in the road was no more than fifteen feet away. His desperately digging feet found a purchase somehow on the ground that rushed under him, and he threw himself

in a final despairing effort against the stubborn hickory pole.

It happened so quickly—the whole thing in the course of seconds—that no man there could be counted a trustworthy witness to any of it; let alone to what happened in that last strained instant. But there were men there who swore afterward that the thick hardwood tongue pole arched under Jim Flood's desperate heave in the way that a long-bow bends in the hands of a powerful Indian.

Such talk always grows up around deeds that men see and cannot believe, let alone explain, and it usually has little to do with fact. But one thing is certain. Just when the runaway coach reached the turn in the road, just when it couldn't have rolled back another five feet without going into the gorge, Jim Flood did turn the front wheels out of the ruts. Alone and unassisted, he cramped the wheels in against the hill with such force that the gears of the rocking vehicle were jackknifed. The near felly smashed in the front end of the box, and the rear of the coach was popped around to strike the cut bank fully broadside, flat. It struck with such an impact that the hind platform was buried in the soft, crumbling bank.

The force of the collision picked Jim Flood up and set him down spread-legged on the end of his spine, on the opposite side of the coach. There he was sitting, cross-eyed and bleeding, and spitting red mud when the others came up.

There was cussing as the incredulous possemen gathered around him—soft, unprofane swearing that expressed their amazement at what they'd seen, and their tribute to the man who'd done it. They made a vague, blurred circle around Jim, and their voices came to him as from a great distance. There was a delicate, tantalizing perfume in Jim Flood's nostrils, and, to destroy the illusion, he brought his eyes into focus with a painful effort and looked about him.

It wasn't an illusion. He didn't understand it, but Lisbeth Dancey was kneeling beside him, talking softly and sponging his face with a cool, moist cloth. He noted that she didn't seem to have been hurt.

Someone stepped close from the ranks of the possemen then and gave Jim a long, thorough scrutiny. "Well, I'll be go to hell!" the man said. "It's Jim Flood. Big as life an' twice as homely. How in hell are yu', Jimmy? Thought you was still in England, a-twistin' them Britisher bulls by the tail!"

That voice. Jim Flood knew it as well as he knew his own. He focused his eyes again, and saw the brown, whiskered face that bent over him. And it was all he could do to stifle an oath. The man above him was his friend, old Hank Albano—wearing a sheriff's star. Hank Albano, the biggest cow operator in Wyoming a year ago, drawing sheriff's money now in Carson County! Hank Albano protecting Sam Dancey's gold shipments out of the cow country Dancey had ruined!

Wash Logan had told Jim about Hank. But seeing it with his own eyes was something else. Jim Flood shuddered, the same as if he'd just taken a long pull from Wash Logan's rotgut jug.

Somebody did haul out a whiskey bottle then, and Jim took a big horn. The stuff burned his raw, bruised mouth. But it had authority, and the warming glow of it inside him braced him up.

"I might of knowed it would be Jimmy," Hank Albano was saying, fussing over him now like a worried mother hen. "Nobody but a Flood would of tried anything like that. It was purty, Jimmy—"

"Purty enough," Brule Fontaine growled, shouldering his way up to tower above Jim and the sheriff. "Purty a job o' sabotage as ever I see. Looka here."

Everyone looked, including Jim Flood. And Jim's heart slipped down into his stomach. The engineer held the two segments of the broken doubletree pin in his hands. He shoved the pin's two severed ends toward his audience, and he didn't have to tell them that the bolt had been cut almost in two. It was there for them to read, in the clean-cut slice the file had made three-fourths of the way through the pin. The remaining fourth, rough and studded with glistening ironides, told how the weakened pin had broken under the weight of the heavy, gold coach on the grade.

"That ain't the pin that was holdin' my doubletrees when I left the Blind Bull Camp!" the driver said suddenly, examining the hub-cap head. "Somebuddy must of switched bolts—*Say!* I seen this hombre

monkeyin' around the coach while we was eatin', back at Point o' Rocks. But I didn't tumble what he was up to."

Hank Albano's face sharpened. "I don't git it."

"Look at the end o' the tongue there, an' you will," Brule Fontaine said. "It's been sawed mostly in two there where it broke. An' the cotter pin's gone out of the brake rod. That's why the brake didn't work. Things like that don't just happen, sheriff."

Hank Albano looked at Jim. He still wasn't convinced. "Why would Jimmy want to wreck yore stage?"

"Maybe," Fontaine said, reasoning cannily, "Maybe he's got accomplices waiting down in the canyon there, for the coach to fall down in. Maybe it's old Wash Logan down there himself. Hell man, there's fifty thousand in free gold on that stage!"

Albano's eyes brightened. But he was still skeptical. "After what Jimmy just done to keep that ol' box from goin' over—"

"Search 'im," Fontaine suggested. "If he ain't got rid o' the pin he took out o' them doubletrees, it'll still be in his pocket."

Hank Albano squatted beside Jim. But Jim Flood took a hold on himself and stood up, unaided. One hand went into his boot, and brought out the missing pin. Fontaine grunted and reached for it. But Jim hurled it into the gorge.

"If you want it," he snarled, "follow it down!"

Brule Fontaine swore and jumped for Jim, but Hank Albano thrust his gun into the engineer's middle and prodded him back.

"Jimmy!" The old man's voice was an accusation, and a desperate plea. "Jimmy, you just pleaded guilty to their charge, in doin' what you did. What the hell you up to, Jimmy?"

Jim Flood brought up a hand and knocked Albano's arms away. "Keep your hands off me, Hank! I'm kind of partic'lar what touches me, these days. You got me cold. Ain't that enough? Maybe you'll get a bounty. That's what you're after, ain't it?"

The old lawman stood spread-footed before Jim, and Jim dropped his gaze before the hurt, wondering look that came reproachfully into the mild, faded gray eye.

"Well, I'll be go to hell," Hank said softly.

"Sheriff," Brule Fontaine said irately, "This jasper must have accomplices down in the gorge there. Seems to me you ought to be riding down there for a look around, 'stead of standin' up here with your reins down."

The sheriff came to life, and Jim Flood smiled bitterly to see how Hank toed the mark for Sam Dancey's assistant, even.

Hank said, "Brule, you an' Tobe take the prisoner in an' lock him up. Rest of you fork yore hosses. We'll hit the gorge from two ways at once. An' if Wash Logan an' his boys are down there, why we'll make this here a roundup!"

III

THERE wasn't room for Jim and his two guards inside the coach, so Jim and the scar-faced Tobe climbed up on top of the box. Fontaine rode inside with the girl.

"He's hurt, Brule," the girl said, indicating Jim. And whatever it was in her look—so strange, and so open and direct, —Jim Flood couldn't tell. Gratefulness, he supposed, because he had saved her life. She *should* be grateful, he thought bitterly. He had thrown down his friends and the one thing he was living for now, and all because she had left town on a lark and had come blundering into his affairs. Couldn't women ever keep in their own place?

Lisbeth Dancey was over-ruled. She rode inside the coach with Fontaine, and Jim rode the top. The scar-faced man tied Jim's swollen, tender wrists brutally tight with a piece of hard rope, and laced them down to the baggage carrier's thin iron railing. It seemed that he was out to torture Jim, deliberately, but Jim gave no sign that he felt any pain, or anything else.

His mind, without his willing it, went back to the girl inside the coach. "I wouldn't trust you as a husband," she had told Fontaine. They must, Jim reasoned, be sweethearts. And what would be more natural? Men of Fontaine's caliber always married the boss's daughter—when they could. And Brule was pretty and

mannered enough to please any woman. Brule would marry Dancey's placer mine, and continue Dancey's work of destruction in Hungry Valley. And Jim Flood might have headed it off, if he hadn't turned to honey when a brainless girl whimpered, because she'd gone and got herself in trouble.

He thought of Wash Logan down in the gorge. He'd thrown the doubletree pin down in the hope of warning Wash that things had gone wrong. But there was a lot of territory down in the canyon. Wash might not see so small an object. And if he didn't, then Hank Albano would corner Wash and his riders like rats in a trap. Everything would be lost then, thanks to him, Jim Flood—thanks to that girl!

Thoughts of Hank Albano goaded Jim further, in his bitterness. He'd seen irony, in all its forms, since his return to Hungry Valley. But nothing to compare with the case of Hank. When Jim Flood rode away from the valley a short year ago, Hank had been a big man, in a big country. Proud and brittle as mountain mahogany —proud and self-contained as old Dan Flood. Now he took sheriff's money, from the man who had ruined him.

Hank, who's been like an uncle to Jim Flood all his life, had sold out to the man who'd brought destruction to Hungry Valley. He'd climbed on Dancey's bandwagon like a common squatter who'd welcome the transformation of cow country into a burrowed prairie dog hill! Hank Albano wasn't an easy man to own. The man who could buy him would have to own everything else. And Jim saw clearer than ever how utterly alone he and Wash Logan were in their fight against the forces which were destroying their valley—how much he had lost when he sacrificed it all to save the life of Lisbeth Dancey.

It was mid-afternoon when the coach climbed from the gorge onto the high arid salt flats where Rozet, metropolis of Hungry Valley, sat among the only cottonwoods within twenty miles. And Jim Flood's face was wooden as he squinted at the old cow town through the bright luminous haze of the day. Rozet, he saw, was puffing up like a poisoned pup. The half block of false-front business houses he had known was now an ugly serpentine maze a mile long. Imposing new brick and clapboard buildings stood high and mighty above everything else, like monuments to Sam Dancey, with great black smokestacks belching black filth into the air.

The tall cottonwoods which had made Rozet the prettiest town in northern Wyoming were mostly gone now—hacked down for logs or firewood. The buildings at the edge of the town were squalid, miserable, and filthy. There were tents and shacks, and dugouts where whole families lived underground like rodents. Dirty, starved-looking children played in the heavy white dust, and drunken men reeled and cursed down the narrow, twisting streets. The stench that boiled up from it all was appalling.

Every other place downtown was a saloon, every third a brothel. Some were tents, with boarded up sides, and others were palatial structures with solid wine-red mahogany bars inlaid with fancy wrought metals.

Of the old Rozet Jim Flood had known, he could see no sign, except an occasional cabin dwelling or false-front business place, crowded back by the new town, shouldered into oblivion. Rozet was gone, and in its place was a boom town. A town that Jim Flood didn't know, sheltering a population he didn't know. A town of Micks and powder monkeys and Cousin Jacks. Sam Dancey's town.

News of the attempted holdup spread as the coach rolled down the teeming street toward the jail. A crowd of bohunks and drunks followed along, staring at Jim and shouting inanities and insults, and, in the presence of so large an audience, Brule Fontaine felt his authority mightily. He climbed from the coach down at the jail while the scar-faced man was untying Jim's hands from the baggage carrier, and when Jim didn't get down quick enough to suit him, he reached up and jerked him down so hard that Jim spread-eagled on his face in the dust by the jail steps.

The crowd cheered, and Fontaine, taking the cue, stepped in and kicked Jim on the swollen bulge over his heart, where his ribs were broken.

"Stand on your legs," Fontaine commanded, "An' show these folks what a stage-robber looks like."

Fired by pain and a swift blind rage,

Jim Flood came up quicker than Fontaine had expected. His bruised right hand rolled into a maul of a fist that smashed straight into the engineer's mouth, splitting his lip to the gum, and setting him down so hard his teeth rattled in his head.

"Stand on your laigs," Jim Flood ranted, "An' show 'em what a polecat looks like!"

The crowd howled its applause, cheering Flood because he was top dog at the moment. But Jim soon realized his mistake. The scar-faced man leaned down from the coach top and swung a pistol against his head, and Jim reeled into the jail wall. Fontaine sat up, spat out two teeth and a chunk of his tongue, and got slowly to his feet. He reached behind him and unhooked a short stay-chain from the front of the coach, and came at Jim, swinging that heavy, murderous weapon.

Jim tried to move. But he couldn't. Fontaine closed, and cut him across the face with the chain, and Jim tasted blood, hot and salty, on his tongue. He was weak and sick, and he watched helplessly while Fontaine swung the wicked weapon once more. That second blow, however, was never delivered. Lisbeth Dancey appeared from somewhere and threw herself, white and panting, between Jim and the thick-linked chain.

"You coward!" she screamed at Fontaine, trembling in her rage. "This man is hurt—hurt saving my life! If you touch him once more, Brule, I'll never speak to you again!"

The mining man fell back before her sudden, dangerous anger. Jim Flood stared at her, marveling dully. But the scar-faced man collared Jim then and dragged him inside the dimly-lighted jail, to forestall further trouble.

"You've blundered yore share today, cowboy," the scar-faced man grated, throwing Jim down upon an unmade bunk in the back cell. "But you blundered most when you laid hands on Brule Fontaine. Brule cuts a mighty fat hawk, hereabout, an' he might decide to make a example of yu'. If he does"— the man leered evilly— "if he does, he'll hang you up by the neck, till you starve!"

He clanged the cell's iron door shut and stalked outside, leaving Jim stunned and sick on the bunk.

JIM was still there when Hank Alamo came in, several hours later, with a doc to fix Jim up inside and a barber to doll up the outside. The medico, a graying, stoop-shouldered man with a tic in one eye, was a stranger to Jim. And it was at once evident that he didn't trust his big-boned patient. He sidled up to Jim like a smith to a killer horse, and made his examination in a hurry. He taped up Jim's broken ribs, reported nothing else broken, and turned Jim over to the curly-headed barber.

The barber stretched Jim out flat on the bunk to shave him, the same as if he were already a corpse. Old Hank sat down to watch, his chair tilted back against the cell grating. He filled the little room with an odor that was both familiar and comforting to Jim Flood. It was the sweet acrid stench of old horse sweat, mingled with a drier, dust smell and the aroma of strong chewing tobacco. The smell lingered in Jim's nostrils and brought back memories that accumulated into one big lump in Jim's throat.

Funny, that a man could change as much as Hank had, and his smell would stay just the same.

"You warned them fly-by-night pardners of yourn, with that pin you flung into the gorge, Jimmy," the old man said at length, breaking an awkward silence. "They got away. An' they didn't leave no forwardin' address. You don't need to talk, Jimmy. We know it was Wash Logan down there. We know Wash got a-holt o' you first, after you'd rid back to the valley, an' that you throwed in with that so-called pack of Avengers. We know it was yore job to wreck the coach an' send it down inta the gorge. You darn near did, too, only"— the old man's voice softened, and a shade of good humor tickled him—"You went soft when it come to killin' that girl. You sow-bellied an' darn near killed yoreself undoin' what you'd already did.

"You've raised hell, all the way around, Jimmy. You've got yorself in a tangle with the lawr, for nothin'. You passed up yore cut out of fifty thousan' in plain, good gold, all on account of a hair-brained girl."

"Hell with the gold!" Jim Flood broke in, savagely. "I didn't aim to take any o' that. I didn't want it. I aimed only to

get at Sam Dancey that way. An' I will yet. Wash'll get me out o' this."

Hank Albano opened his mouth to say something. But Jim cut him off. "I rode away from this basin a year ago, Hank, for England, to buy up them Hereford bulls to thicken up our longhorn strain with. When I left, the valley here was the sweetest corner o' cow country in this whole territory. An' Dad an' the Box B was ridin' the top.

"When I come back, I find Pa murdered an' in his grave, an' the Box B gone to pot. I find the whole valley gophered up like a prairie dog town. The cricks dammed off an' poisoned by miners' chemicals, fences tore down an' burned for firewood, an' sluiceboxes an' long toms an' rockers scattered hell, west an' crooked. Find the country filled up with Cousin Jacks an' hellpukes who've took over the country an' beefed all my good cows to eat.

"I find Wash Logan is the only man in all Hungry Valley that had the gravel to stand up an' kick the thievin' bohunks back. Find all the rest o' the poolers up here workin' for the King o' the Cousin Jacks—the man that ruined 'em. Find the president o' the pool wearin' a tin star an' pourin' jacklaig law down the others' throats. Hell! An' you used to be a cowman!"

The hurt look that came into the lawman's faded gray eyes told Jim that his words had cut deeply. It brought back memories of the day when his own dad and Hank Albano had been like twin gods to him. And the memories galled Jim like saddle sores.

"If ever you git in bad, an' I'm not around," Jim's father had told him, time and time again, "Go to Hank, the same as you'd go to me. Hank is square as a die. You can put his word in the bank an' check on it, any day o' the week. 'Member that, son, always—"

Jim was remembering now. And the hurt went deeper, remembering.

"Wash Logan shore has got his tongs in you, Jimmy," Hank said. "Wash is purty slick. *Avengers!*" he snorted. *"Sca*vengers is more like it. Wash is out to git all the loot he kin, son. An' that's as far in as his grudge goes. He's just usin' you, like a cat's paw.

"Hell, yo're mighty short-haided, for a Flood, Jimmy. Look at how he worked this holdup attempt. You got the job o' plantin' that doctored doubletree pin, while Wash was hunkering down, way down in the crack, out o' sight an' gunshot. He must of knowed that giveaway doubletree bolt would be found, Jimmy, even if the coach did go over the edge, an' that you'd be stuck with it.

"Look, Jimmy. If you hadn't of wrastled that stage tongue like you did—if that coach had gone over the rim with the girl inside it—why, hell, Jimmy, you'd be hangin' up by yore neck, right now. Maybe Wash figgered on that."

It was a disturbing thought. But Jim Flood's loyalty was his strength. If that went now, there would be nothing left.

"Hell with that noise, Hank. You can't drive your wedge between Wash an' me. Wash had the guts to stand up to the Cousin Jacks. That cuts ice with me."

Hank caught the dig again, and his face flushed under his matted beard. "Yo're bitter, Jimmy, over what the gold rush has did to yore ranch an' yore range. Hell, I don't blame yu'. But it ain't no use to go mean again' folks that ain't no wise to blame."

"Ain't to blame?"

"Hell no, son. Nobody blamed the cowmen when they took the land from the Injuns. Nobody except the Injuns theirselves. The cowmen crowded the Injun off, an when the Injun fought back, he was kilt, pronto. An' it wasn't nobody's fault, Jimmy. It just happened. You couldn't blame the cowmen for wantin' the ground, when the Injuns wasn't makin' any use of it, accordin' to the cowman's idears. An' you couldn't blame the Injuns for fightin' back. But it didn't git 'em anything.

"It's dawg eat dawg, Jimmy," Hank philosophized. "An' majority rules. Now the cowmen is gettin' paid back in their own coin. Gold's been discovered on the land they found grass on. The miners are movin' in on the cowmen same as the cowmen moved in on the Injun. Maybe these dirt-grubbers didn't have no right to come in an' slaughter our cows to feed their kids, a-standin' us back with wagon guns. But they did 'er, Jimmy, same as we fenced off the Injun land an' killed off

the wild game. An' I reckon there ain't much difference, rilly.

"My outfit come on top first time, an' I thought it was fine. This time my outfit was licked. I don't think it's fine. But there ain't any benefit in turnin' mean like Wash Logan done. Majority rules, Jimmy. We-all killed the renegade Injuns—the ones that couldn't take things the way they had to be. An' folks'll kill the renegade whites, same way. You got to go along, Jimmy. That's why I taken this job. I got to eat.

"An' I do my job, same as when I was ranchin'. If you an' Wash an' the others bust the lawr, why then yo're a-fightin' ol' Hank Albano, all the way. An' I ain't forgot how!"

Jim Flood sat quiet, thinking for a long time. And, twist it how he would, he could not escape the old man's hard, clear logic. But this only added salt to the venom of his wounds.

"Reckon it just had to happen that Dancey killed my dad!" he lashed out. "Reckon I'm supposed to forgit all about that an' go to work for him now. Either that, or sell my gun to him an' help him hang onto what he's stole—*from me!*"

Old Hank sat upright on his chair, and his eyes went very quiet and clear. "You better git over the idear that Sam killed yore pa, Jimmy. Better drop it right now, 'cause you've got the wrong sow by the ear. Sam could of had trouble with Dan Flood, if he'd wanted it. But he didn't want it. An' he had no call to kill Dan."

Jim's face darkened. "Who did then? Didn't Pa head the fight again' the miners here?"

Hank's eyes remained steady, but he fidgeted on his chair. "No Jimmy," he said at last, in a voice that sounded like wind under dead leaves. "Fact o' the matter is, yore Pa was mixed up in somethin' that stunk mighty high, up wind, Jimmy. I don't just savvy how. I ain't got it studied out. But it was the cow folks, not Sam Dancey or the miners, that had reason to kill him.

"That's Gawd's truth, Jimmy. An' that's one o' the reasons I don't trust Wash Logan far as I can throw a bull by the tail. If Wash was on the level, he'd be doggin' Flood stock harder'n anybody, because it's his nature. But, 'stead of that, he's shinin' up to you, ropin' you in on his owl-hooter band. It don't look right."

Jim Flood had followed the old man's words with care, and apprehension gripped him in a wrenching twist. The barber had finished with him, and he leaned suddenly toward Hank.

"What is it you are sayin' about Pa?" he demanded, his voice grating like a rusty old hinge.

But, whatever it was about Dan Flood, Hank couldn't bring himself to say it—not to old Dan's own son. Hank coughed once or twice, and fidgeted more under Jim's burning eyes.

"Aw, hell, Jimmy," he said, "put on them clean clothes, so's you'll look like a white man. Then we'll go over an' chin with Sam. He's wantin' to see you, anyways."

IV

THE sun was almost gone behind the high square shoulder of Hungry Mountain when Jim Flood stepped into the street ahead of the hard-heeling sheriff. Hank's words concerning his father had filled him with a bitter, black foreboding, and he almost walked right into a waiting line of men at a newly erected clapboard shack right next to the jail. A rude desk filled the shack's doorway, and a bald-headed cigar-sucking man sat there, writing with a pen as another man talked.

A sign above the door said,

WANTED: POWDER MONKEYS
AND LONG TOM SHAKERS
Four bits a day and found
No experience necessary

The men Jim saw there were no thick-hipped, mud-haired bohunks. They were light of build with slim wasp waists and small, narrow thighs. Their legs were bowed until a whole herd of hogs could have been driven straight through that line without disturbing a man of them, and them standing with their heels together! Their denim overalls were foxed and threadbare, scrubbed white with harsh soap and curry-brushes on the ditch banks. Their high-heeled boots were scuffed and so run-over at the heels that all of them were standing on their ankles.

Jim Flood knew how boots got worn like that. High heels were not made to

walk in. The men who wore them were not meant to walk.

Jim saw Plink Bolderwood then, a man who'd ridden for the Box B as long as Jim could remember. Jim spoke a greeting, but Plink's glance skimmed over him, without recognition.

Then Jim saw something else—a crude Box B brand, traced into the base of the old jail tie-post. Jim recalled the night he and Plink had branded the post with the Flood range mark, just to show their dander. Jim had outlined the box with his six-shooter at thirty feet, and Plink had drawn his own gun and placed the B inside the rough square. And when the cautious sheriff had shown his head through the jail door, they had shot up the law sign just above his head and sent him, cussing, back inside.

The brand had been there next day for the sheriff to read. But the law had never mentioned the incident. The Box B had had that kind of standing in the basin—then.

Plink Bolderwood must have followed the course of Jim's eyes. For he spread his lips suddenly, and spat between his teeth, with a sharp, hissing sound. The charge of brown tobacco juice struck the Box B. Obliterated it. And Plink turned his back on Jim, with studied insolence.

Jim's shoulders bunched. But a small, firm hand restrained him. "Don't be a darn fool, Jimmy," Hank counselled. "Folks feel that way around here now, an' you might's well git used to the idee. Anyhow, yo're still my prisoner."

Jim went along, peaceably, but the bitterness of the brand incident was still in his mouth when he faced Sam Dancey in the latter's spacious office a few minutes later.

Sam Dancey hardly tallied with Jim's preconceived notion of what the promoter would look like. He was a broad, middle-aging man with iron gray hair and a square bulldog chin. He was heavy but firm of flesh, and about him was a rugged ruthlessness that reminded Jim of an old range-boss bull on the prod.

"So this is Jim Flood," the promoter mused, staring at Jim from his fine swivel chair, the judge and jury of all he surveyed. "Young man, you have some explaining to do. I've just heard of your exploit, up on the dug road. And while you are undoubtedly guilty of conspiracy to rob and wreck my gold coach, still I'm a grateful father. I'm inclined to deal leniently with you, son."

The mining magnate's manner fanned the sullen, hateful anger inside Jim Flood. He spat ten feet into a brass cuspidor, inches from Dancey's highly-polished boots. But Dancey's face didn't change. And he didn't move his feet.

"I wouldn't be too lenient," Jim said, flatly. "I won't be lenient, when I get the whip!"

A shadow of annoyance flushed Dancey's face. "I might have known you'd be difficult, Flood. Lord knows your father was. He gave us trouble for no reason—"

"So you killed him!" Jim blurted. "Well, you better kill me too, because I am to give you more trouble than you ever knew was."

Sam Dancey's smooth-shaven face flushed further. But there was no other change in his expression. "So that's why you've got your neck bowed," he said, still in his quiet, musing voice. "You think I killed your father. That's not true, Flood. Please understand that, now and forever. I had no reason to kill Dan Flood.

"Your father pulled the greatest double-cross in mining history up here. The biggest hoax ever put over. But it backfired, son. Backfired and killed him. I had no reason to kill him, because his fraud worked to my favor, in the long run. But plenty of others had reason to do it.

"Dan Flood salted this valley, son, if you don't already know. He brought a dozen or so wagonloads of rough ore down from the hardrock workings around Deadwood or somewhere. He scattered it over his rangeland, and let someone else find it. The word went around, and the rush was on.

"I don't know for certain why he did it. He was killed before I got to talk with him. He must have figured on selling out his ground, and salted it with the idea of increasing its value, by a thousand per cent. Either that, or he aimed to ruin the other ranchers here with a little gold rush. Then, when the bubble had burst, he could have taken the whole valley over, for a song.

"But there was a joker, son. There really *was* gold in this here valley. Gold that nobody knew about. Your father's hoax brought the miners and prospectors in, as he planned. But they found the real McCoy. The placer vein I discovered up in Blind Bull Gulch, on public domain, is the richest of its kind in all this country. And, once real gold was found, the rush got out of hand. People swarmed in here like flies. None of the stockmen, not even your father, could keep the mobs off their range or ranch ground. They slaughtered cattle, tore down fences, and took over, generally.

"Dan Flood was caught then, same as the others, in the trap of his own making. He was so loud-mouthed in his weeping that I didn't suspect him of the salting, even after my engineers reported at first that the gold was not free gold at all, but high-grade rough ore from some hardrock shaft. But after he was killed, we found a dozen tons of that hardrock ore still stored around in his ranch buildings.

"Who killed him? I don't know. But I can guess. It was the first man, a rancher, probably, who found out that Dan Flood was the man who'd started the rush—with his salting hoax."

THE promoter ceased speaking, and Jim Flood stood rigidly quiet, the miner's accusation burning into his consciousness. Then, when the first ghastliness of it had passed, he moved toward Dancey, stiff and menacing.

"It's a lie, Dancey!" he choked. "It's a damnedable, low-down frame-up of your own making!"

Dancey came to his feet, choking. "I'm telling you, Flood—"

"And I'm telling *you*, Dancey!" Jim shoved the magnate back into his chair. "My dad wouldn't of salted this valley. He wouldn't of had to, to start a rush. *My dad knew about that gold in the Blind Bull Gulch ten years ago!*"

"He what?"

Dancey and Hank Albano spoke the words together, as if with a common tongue. Dancey sat upright on his chair again, and Hank edged closer to hear, his face gray as an old wet blanket.

"Shore he knew 'bout it!"

Jim Flood shouted at the disbelief he saw in both their eyes. "I ought to know. I was the one that found it! It was durin' spring roundup, ten years ago. You ought to remember that, Hank. You was roundup boss of the pool that year. You give the Box B the Piebald Hills to ride. An' when pa an' me cut Blind Bull Crick there in the Gulch, I piled off my horse to get a drink.

"I layed down on the bank, an' I saw somethin' shinin' down in the water. I picked it up, an' it was a hunk o' yella rock, half as big as my fist. It was a lot heavier'n blacktop, an' all pock-marked, sort of.

"Pa come over when I yelled. He studied it, then took an' threw it up in the wheatgrass on the side o' the gulch. Then he set down an' told me what'd happen to the country if gold was found on it. Told me what happened to the Injun ground in Dakota when gold was found there. Told me about Sutter's big spread in California, an' how it was over-run with Micks an' Sidney Ducks when gold was found there. Told me Sutter himself died on the grubline, with everything gone to pot.

"Pa told me it would be the end o' ranchin' in this country, if the word got round there was gold. He told me the Floods would make theirs with cows, instead of rootin' in the ground like hawgs, for yella rock. Made me promise I'd never breathe a word about it. An' I never did. We never even mentioned it between us. Then you try to tell me he salted this range!"

Sam Dancey sat very quiet, studying Jim out of narrowed, speculative eyes. Then his upper lip curled.

"Either you are lying, Flood, or your father was crazy and could have done anything. Finding gold, and not doing anything about it—"

Jim Flood took a quick step forward. His big hands closed on the promoter's whipcord jacket and pulled him, spluttering, to his feet. He pushed his face close to Dancey's, and the cords stood out like ropes along his neck. "Dancey," he grated, "If you'd ever cow-ranched a day in your life, if you'd ever rode night herd on a bunch of fat market cut-backs—no, you've never done that. You've never done anything but gopher into the ground for yella

muck. You wouldn't know what I was talkin' about.

"But you *do* know when this range was salted, an' why. When the showdown comes, I reckon we'll find you playin' for the cow range, as well as for the gold. And the showdown is comin'—now. I said I'll kill you, Dancey—"

Jim didn't finish what he was saying. Something hard slammed into the side of his head, and sent him reeling sideways against the wall. The room was whirling around him, and he could see Hank coming at him through the haze. Hank's eyes were smoky slits in his face, and he had a gun clubbed in his hand. He was threatening to hit Jim again if Jim didn't square around and act like he had the sense he was born with.

Jim waited quietly, his eyes measuring. Then he lashed out suddenly with one knotted fist. It connected squarely between Hank's eyes. Hank went down without a sound. Jim turned then and saw Dancey was pulling a new-styled automatic pistol out of his desk drawer.

JIM had never used such a gun, but he'd seen pictures of them, and read of their potential qualities. He jumped. He smashed savagely at the mining magnate's square, flushed face. He missed. But his elbow, following through, struck the promoter a jarring oblique blow across the mouth. Sam Dancey reeled backward and spat red blood. Jim stepped in and hit him once more, a long, swooping underhand swing that lifted the magnate off his feet and put him flat on his back on the floor.

A door scraped open behind Jim, and boots scuffed the uncovered plank floor. Jim grabbed up the gun Dancey had dropped, and turned. The stage driver and the cross-eyed guard were standing in an open door, looking at him, wild-eyed.

Jim shoved the funny-looking gun at them, and looked through the door behind them. He saw that the next room was the Rozet Stage Company office, and it gave him an idea. The stage hauled the mine payroll to Blind Bull Gulch once a week. Tomorrow, the way Jim had it, was pay day up at the mines. There must be a sizeable stake in paper money in that office, if a man could get to it. Jim had an idea he could get to it, with the gun in his hand. He had an idea that fifty thousand in paper would look as big to Wash Logan as fifty thousand in free gold. And it would be a sight easier to wrangle.

"Back up," Jim ordered the startled stage men. "An' back slow."

A glance at Hank and Sam Dancey convinced him that neither of them would be around for a while. He stepped into the stage office. "Whereat is the safe in here?" he barked.

The cross-eyed man gestured with one hand, and Flood glanced in the direction indicated. He saw the safe, all right. But he saw something else, as well—something that straightened him up, where he stood. Lisbeth Dancey was standing in front of the iron strongbox, looking at him. There was a friendly smile on her face. But contempt was mirrored in her wide eyes, contempt and a challenge, and a desperate courage.

For a prolonged moment, the girl regarded Jim with unblinking, breathless concentration. Then she did a strange thing. She smiled wider and pointed to the gun. "Why that's my father's new navy pistol," she said. "He doesn't know yet how it works. It's never even been loaded."

She might have been talking of a store gun in a counter showcase, for all the emotion she showed. But her words were a signal for action. The cross-eyed man jumped for Jim, and the driver went for his gun.

The next few moments were a blur to Jim. He had no time to think. He did the only thing he could. He hurled the useless gun straight into the charging guard's face, and saw the man drop, his face a surprised, bloody mask. Then Jim lunged toward the outside door.

The stage driver's gun crashed behind him, and the slug perforated the door jamb just above his head. The next second, he was outside, onto the plank sidewalk. A spooky cow pony mare reared back from the tie rail as he appeared, snapping the latigo rein that tethered her off close to the bit. Jim came up as she turned to flee, and vaulted into the saddle from the Injun side, without touching leather. The boogered bronco squealed and tried to pitch, but Jim lay flat against her neck, reached

for the one trailing rein, and raked her with his long-roweled spurs. The bronc straightened to a short, buck-jumping run, down the street and out of town.

A scattered volley followed Jim on his wild ride out of Rozet. But he was soon out of range. It was too dark to tell whether any pursuit was coming, but he took no chances. He held the pony to a gruelling run until he was afraid he'd wind her. Then he slowed to a trot, bending his trail always toward Seven Devils Gorge.

Jim Flood dismounted on reaching the mouth of the gorge and held his ear to the ground. He could hear no horse following, so he rode boldly into the canyon, whistling a tuneless range ballad and making his presence there generally unsecretive. He didn't know where Logan's night guards might be stationed, and he didn't want a bullet in the heart.

It was rough going, especially after the high rearing walls shut out the moon. The trail was almost straight up-and-down, and the mare floundered and stumbled over the talus rock under foot. Several times she almost went down, but she was plucky and smart as tacks and when Jim perceived this, he let her have her head. The going was better then.

The hours dragged, and Jim was despairing of ever finding Logan in the dark when a deep, muted voice challenged him. "Whoa up, stranger, an' set mighty still. Who are yu', an' where yu' think yo're goin'?"

"Jim Flood," he answered, relieved to have found some human being in that dark jungle of stone. "I'm lookin' for Wash Logan."

There was a silence. Then a rustle and a sliding of loose rock. Then a man's dark shape emerged from the canyon shadows. "Danged if it ain't," the voice said, incredulously. "Well, that makes it even, 'cause Wash is lookin' for you, too."

"I reckoned he'd be wonderin' about me," Jim started to say. But he didn't get it all out. Too late, he saw the night guard swinging his rifle, club-fashion, above his head. Jim tried to dodge, but the heavy stock struck him in the small of his neck. Fire shapes exploded and danced before his eyes. Then they turned black and swallowed him.

V

CONSCIOUSNESS filled Jim Flood's mind, slowly and painfully. He could remember nothing of what had happened to him, but he knew he'd been hurt, and, sensing the presence of some lethal danger yet, he remained perfectly quiet until he'd figured out where he was.

He was lying on his face on cold, hard earth, and there seemed to be a faint light around him. Light and far-off voices. He was certain of that much. But the knowledge only heightened his primitive, innate wariness. He continued to lie quiet, and concentrated his entire consciousness into listening. After a time, he recognized the voice that droned in his ear as belonging to Wash Logan.

The discovery recalled his hard, wild ride from Rozet, and the guard who'd slugged him in the canyon. He knew then that he must be back in Wash Logan's mountain hideout. He risked opening one eye a crack. The room was only vaguely lighted, but he recognized Logan's cabin at once. He knew then that Logan's own guard had struck him down.

Moving his head ever so little, he looked toward the light. The old lantern that lighted the place sat on the ground by the rough pine table against the window. Logan sat upon an over-turned Dutch oven in full light of the lamp. His riders lounged around him, listening to his words, and looking wise.

Wash Logan was a powerfully built man with long, gangling arms and a gorilla stoop. He'd let his hair grow during the year that he'd been on the dodge, and he looked like something wild. Wash had his bowie knife in his hand, slicing slivers from a long stick. His eyes were black as flints, and they gleamed coldly now in the lantern light. His eyes weren't on his whittling. They were on the man who squatted down beside him.

Jim saw then that the man beside Logan was Brule Fontaine, and Jim's teeth clicked shut with a snap that was audible in that small room. Wash ceased speaking abruptly, and Jim Flood felt the impact of a dozen, hostile eyes. He closed his lids and lay very still, trying to breathe naturally. A man stepped up and turned him over with his foot.

"Still out—like a light," his inspector announced. And Logan's heavy, nasal voice went on.

"Us boys've earnt every nickel we've took away from Sam Dancey, Brule. Why should we ought to turn aroun' now an' hand it back to you? You said what we got was ourn."

Fontaine laughed. "Hell, Wash, I ain't takin' it. I'm only borrowin' it. An' it'll pay big interest. I'm playin' for the Dancey mine now, Wash. We can buy that vein purty cheap, too, right away, with dust we've stole from Dancey himself. Buy him out with his own coin, as they say. That's good business, ain't it?"

"Was you playin' for that mine when you salted this country with hardrock ore a year ago?" Logan asked, the faintest edge of antagonism in his voice. Jim Flood stiffened and almost stopped breathing, and Brule Fontaine's next words stilled the blood in his veins.

"No. I was playin' for the rangeland here, just like I said then. I didn't know nothing about that Blind Bull placer vein, any more than you. I only figgered I could start a rush up here an' fix the rangeland so's a man like me with a little capital could step in an' clean it up. But a man has got to be broad-minded, Wash. When that real gold popped up, on Dancey's claim, I changed my mind. I started to play Dancey for his vein then, an' I've come a long ways. I'm about ready now to foreclose on the Blind Bull, Wash. But Dancey'll think I'm doin' him a good turn, by buyin' it. He won't know I'm payin' him in his own coin."

"'F Dancey'd sell his mine for what dust we've took from him, why the vein ain't worth much," Logan pronounced.

Fontaine laughed again. "Hell, Wash, give me credit. I'm in charge of Dancey's minin' operations, an' that vein at Blind Bull is turnin' under ground now. I've followed it in a ways, an' it faults about ten feet under. I've picked it up again, of course. But Dancey don't know that. I've arranged so as it'll be lost. Sam'll sell purty cheap."

Logan wagged his massive head. "Sam's nobuddy's fool. He wouldn't let go of a mine like that till he knew damn' well it was gone."

"If Sam needed money bad enough an' couldn't git it from his mine," Fontaine said softly, "he might do anything."

"Sam need money. What fur?"

Fontaine bit the end off a new cigar, and lighted it, with meticulous care. "If somebody should up an' kidnap Sam's daughter an' demand two-three hundred thousan' dollars ransom, an' if Sam couldn't raise the dough on account of his vein pinchin' off, he'd want money an' want it bad, wouldn't he? Then if somebody upped and offered him that much cash for his played out mine, he'd talk bizness, wouldn't he?"

"Kidnap a *girl?* In this country?" Wash Logan caught his breath, in kind of a wheeze. "Why folks'd hunt us down, like snakes."

Fontaine leaned toward Logan, and his features sharpened, like a hawk's. "Folks are huntin' you right now, Wash," he reminded, his voice soft as plush. "An' they'd be huntin' you a lot harder, if they knew you killed ol' Dan Flood!"

Wash Logan sat very quiet on his Dutch oven, and the lantern light made small needle points of hate in his eyes. "An' if folks knew who paid me to do it, because Dan had stumbled onto you saltin' his range, maybe they'd be huntin' someone else, huh?"

WASH LOGAN wasn't whittling any more. He was holding the knife by the tip of the blade, its handle pointing to the floor. He could throw it that way, end over end.

Fontaine watched the knife. He didn't move, and Logan's men stood motionless around, a grim, lamp-lit frieze. Then Fontaine broke it. He laughed, sharply. "There's no need us quarrelin', Wash. You need me, an' I need you. I just wanted it remembered I'm boss. You could kill me here, if you wanted—maybe. But that wouldn't net you nothin'. There's a letter to the sheriff in my papers, tellin' the whole story of our operations. I left it there, in case of somethin' like this, Wash. Anyhow, you kill me, an' you'll lose what you'll have comin'—when we take over the Blind Bull.

"What I was gettin' at, Wash," the engineer went on, more friendly now, "is, you are a marked man. You got to git out

of the country anyhow, quick as you've made your stake. Me, I've kept my skirts clean, an' folks think I'm a fine citizen. I ain't in danger of jail, like you are.

"Now, I was thinkin', you boys could kidnap the girl. I'd arrange it, an' stick around town to act as go-between. After I'd closed the mine deal with Dancey, I'd ride up an' rescue the gal from you, playin' the hero. Then, quick as the vein started puttin' out again, I'd pay you boys off, an' you could leave the country. We'd do it so's it would all look right-side-up. An' even if some folks did git ideas, it wouldn't matter. Not once I'd got hold of the Blind Bull, an' married the gal."

"Married the gal?" Wash Logan was a realist. He looked Fontaine over, and spat. "You think the gal'd marry you?"

Brule Fontaine ignored the thrust. He sat quiet, ruminating, gazing into the lamp. His eyes were narrowed, speculative. "She might jump at a chance to marry me," he said, "Once we got back to town."

Logan grinned slowly, and cut his eyes at his riders. He started to say something. But he thought better of it and sat still, thinking his private thoughts. "I b'lieve," he said, slowly, at length, "that might work. The deal with Dancey, I mean." His riders caught the allusion in his words. They shuffled their feet, and grinned broadly. But Fontaine continued to stare into the lantern flame.

Jim Flood lay quietly yet on the floor. The shock of what he'd heard had cleared his head. But he'd heard too much to digest it in a single wad, and his tortured brain was wrestling with it, trying to reconcile his thinking to these new discoveries, and fit the pieces together into a general picture.

There was a night-marish improbability about the whole business—about his lying there in Wash Logan's hideout cabin, wounded and threatened with death from the only man in the world he'd trusted. But he couldn't deny the reality of it. Wash Logan had used him, just as Hank had said. Wash was not the crusading spirit he had posed to be, bent on avenging the rape of Hungry Valley. Wash Logan was only a thin-principled predator, interested merely in easy loot.

Wash Logan was a part of these very forces Jim Flood had set out to destroy. But Brule Fontaine was the brains—the head of the octopus that was sucking the blood from the valley. It was Brule, not Wash, who had planned the holdup that day. Brule had known that the treasure coach was doomed when he rode out with the posse to meet it. That was why he had tried to keep Lisbeth Dancey from boarding it.

But Fontaine was a stronger man than Jim Flood. Once the girl was on, Fontaine would have let her die. Jim had weakened at the last. He'd spoiled the best-laid plot ever hatched inside Fontaine's scheming head, just to save the life of a headstrong girl. And Fontaine had taken his vengeance by betraying Jim to the law. Now Jim had escaped from the law, only to fall into Fontaine's clutches again. He'd not escape, this time.

"What we goin' to do with the younker there?" Wash Logan asked.

Fontaine shrugged his wide shoulders. "That's up to you. He's your baby. I told you he'd botch things, if you cut him in on that job. But you had to ring him in, because you was afraid to plant that doubletree bolt your own self. Well, you can git rid of him, now. But this time, you better make it good."

Jim Flood heard the mining man pronounce his death warrant. But his reaction was dulled by the realization that his hate for Sam Dancey had been a delusion, after all. The knowledge that it was Fontaine who had salted Hungry Valley and Wash Logan who'd killed his father should have transferred his hate to those two. But hate is a product of slow, insidious poisoning of thought. Anyhow, Flood was too stunned now for any such extravagant emotion.

Instead, there was awakening in him now another feeling, alien and strange and disturbing. He was remembering the guileless warmth of Lisbeth Dancey's tawny wide eyes, the savage loathing on her face when she threw herself in front of him to protect him from the chain in Fontaine's hand.

He was thinking that she would look like that again, when Brule Fontaine had trapped her as he planned. Only there would be no one to intervene, then, as she had intervened for him back at the jail.

Jim Flood's bleak rumination was end-

ed suddenly when Wash Logan jumped to his feet and dug down for the gun at his hip. Brule Fontaine, startled at Logan's unexpected move, threw himself sideways off his chair, pulling at his own gun. His eyes were on Logan, and in them was a hard, suspicious flare.

But Logan didn't shoot Fontaine. He fired at the window, three times in rapid succession. Then he blew out the lantern and slipped through the door, outside.

VI

WASH LOGAN'S riders followed him out into night, and when they returned they brought the body of a man. Wash closed the door and lighted the lantern again, and the pale yellow light fell upon the bleeding, up-turned face of old Hank Albano. Hank was hit and out, if not dead, and the men in the room gathered around him, gaping like fish out of water.

Jim noted that Hank was still breathing. But Wash Logan wasn't looking at Hank. Wash was looking at Brule Fontaine. His eyes were black, liquid pools of suspicion.

"What was he doin', out by the window?" he demanded, and his voice was weighted with the same deep-seated mistrust as was mirrored in his eyes.

Fontaine looked surprised and annoyed. "You askin' me? Why, he come up with the kid there, maybe. I don't know."

"My boys are watchin' the trail down," Logan said, his eyes still watching Fontaine with a sharp, feline wariness. "He couldn't of got by them."

Fontaine returned his stare, coldly. "What you drivin' at, Wash?"

Logan gave no ground. "I was wonderin' if he might of come up with you."

Brule Fontaine laughed. "Wash, I thought you was smart. You think I'd throw in with the law, at this stage of the game?"

"I can't figger it no other way," Logan growled, doggedly. "He wouldn't come up here alone. We looked around outside. But we didn't see nobuddy else."

Jim Flood had never thought he'd live to see the day he'd welcome the sight of a law posse. But he'd have given his right arm, willingly, to learn that old Hank had such a body somewhere outside. His hopes had soared high when first they'd brought the old lawman in. But these hopes were blasted by Logan's last words. He still couldn't account for Hank coming there, alone. But he knew that no posse was out there in the gorge, or they'd never have allowed Hank to be taken as he was.

"Never shoot a sheriff, Wash," Fontaine said, "Unless you shoot to kill. Wounded sheriff's like a wounded bear. They're both bad luck."

Then, thinking apparently to allay Logan's suspicions that he was in with the lawman, Brule Fontaine stooped and pressed the muzzle of his gun against Hank Albano's ear. The hammer clicked as he pulled it back to full cock. And that sharp metallic sound released the spring that had held Jim Flood taut and motionless. He sat bolt upright on the floor, and Logan's riders jumped the same as if a corpse had come to life before their eyes.

"Shootin' a sheriff's bad luck any time," Jim Flood rasped, bluffing futilely. "With a posse waitin' outside, it's pizen."

"Posse?" Logan and Fontaine spoke the word together. Jim Flood saw the brittle suspicion sheen leap back into Logan's black eyes, and a desperate plan occurred to him. A plan to fan that suspicion, and play the mutually distrustful killers against each other.

It might not work. But he had nothing to lose if it didn't. They could only kill him, and they'd do that anyway. They'd kill him and Hank both.

"Shore, posse!" he blurted, talking almost without knowing what he said, and his mind struggled desperately to keep up with his words. "You think Hank would come up here alone? You think Hank's as crazy as you are, Wash?"

Hope rose within Jim Flood when he saw the response his words evoked in Logan's stupid, gullible, suspicious face. *"Posse?"* Logan repeated thickly. And apprehension was dripping from the word.

"Shore!" Jim Flood talked rapidly, wanting to have his say before Fontaine could shut him off. "Brule's tyin' the hangknot there, an' you are shovin' your head in. Fontaine'll kill Hank, an' tell the posse you did it, just to get rid of yu'. An' how many of them would believe you, against him? Brule's sold you out already."

"Sold me out?" Logan's voice was cold as ice.

"Why, hell yes. I was ridin' up to warn you, but that locoed guard slugged me. Now it's too late. But things'll be worse, if Dancey's posse finds Hank dead when they bust this cabin in."

Jim saw then he'd gone too fast. Skeptic doubt began to alloy the suspicion in Logan's blinking eyes, and he talked desperately on, to fan that insidious distrust up once more.

"I give you away, in town, Wash," he lied, inspired. "I didn't want to. But they hoss-whipped me. I told 'em everything about you an' Brule, an' they arrested Brule, too. He'd be in jail right now, only Dancey is mighty fond of his coin, an' he offered to make it easy on Brule if Brule would get back the dust Dancey lost to you boys. Brule took 'im up, an' rode up here to hand you a cock an' bull story about needin' the dust you've got, to—to buy a mine with. The posse's waitin' somewhere outside now. Quick as Brule comes out, with the dust, they aim to cut down on this cabin, an' blow it clean out o' the canyon.

"I heard 'em plot it, right there in the jail, Wash. Quick as they'd all gone, I slugged the guard an' escaped. I got me a horse an' rode up to warn yu'. Then that thick-haided guard down yonder hit me."

BRULE FONTAINE had stared at Flood, wide-eyed and blinking, at first—surprised into silence. But now, seeing through Jim's desperate bluff, he grinned a crooked grin, and started to say something. He broke off short, however, when he glanced at Logan and saw that the thick-set outlaw was swallowing it. The grin left his face.

"He's lyin,' Wash," he grated. But the very vehement insistence of his tone worked against him. It suggested he was lying and bluffing, to clear himself. "Why, he didn't even know I was in on this, 'less you told him. I—"

"You ain't in on it, Brule," Wash Logan hissed. His suspicious eyes were narrowed to luminous black slits, and his hand crept toward his knife. "Not no more. Each us boys got a stake now, that'll take us to South America an' set us up. You can plumb go to hell, Brule!

"I figgered for a long time you was tryin' to pull somethin'. Well, maybe this is it. Anyhow, by God, I'll—"

Wash took a step toward Fontaine, his knife half drawn. The engineer read his intent in his pitch black eyes, and he wasn't caught flat-footed. His gun wasn't pointed at Hank anymore. It was pointed at Wash Logan's middle. The hammer was still eared back.

"Yeah, Wash?" Fontaine said softly. "You'll what?"

The gun and the look in Fontaine's greeny eyes must have confirmed all that Logan feared. For he hunched his shoulders and kicked suddenly at Fontaine's gun—and missed.

That was Wash Logan's last blunder. Fontaine fired twice, straight into the big outlaw's sagging middle. The second shot seemed to have shattered his spine, for he screamed and fell sidewise, dead before he ever hit the floor.

The nearest of Logan's riders jumped for Fontaine then, and the engineer's gun dropped him in his tracks. Another went for his own gun, and Fontaine shot him through the head. The others broke, leaderless and unnerved, and ran for the door.

Jim Flood's shot-in-the-dark scheme had succeeded so far beyond his expectations that he was caught flat-footed in the showdown. He was near enough to Fontaine that he might have reached him, while the engineer was busy with the others. But it was all over with before he'd gotten to his feet. Already the door was open, and Logan's riders were streaming out of it, into the night.

The lantern was on the floor, within easy reach of Flood's foot. He kicked it over, and, as darkness flooded into the room, he raced with the others toward the light gray rectangle of the door. But Jim didn't follow the others outside. He shouldered against the heavy pine door and smashed it shut on its massive iron hinges, plunging the room into complete blackness. Then he whirled and crouched, as Fontaine's gun-flame lanced the dark. He felt the breath of the slug as it went by him, heard it *plop* into the wall.

Against Fontaine's flame-spitting weapon, Jim Flood had no weapon but his

hands. He might have located Logan's body in the dark, and armed himself with the dead man's knife. But he didn't dare move from where he crouched. He hardly dared to breathe in that heavy, chambered darkness. Five shots had come from Fontaine's gun. There was one more, likely, under the hammer of his gun. If Jim betrayed his position, he would draw that last shot.

Outside there was the sound of horses, as Logan's boogered henchmen mounted and rode away, with Jim Flood's tale of a posse still in their ears, and Fontaine's actions confirming it, in their minds. Inside the room, however, there was not a sound, and the darkness was so thick a sharp knife could have cut it.

Wherever Fontaine might be in that room, Jim Flood knew he could reach him in a single bound. But Jim had to locate him first, before Fontaine located Jim. So he crouched in the dark, like a footracer on his starting blocks, listening with all the powers of his senses for some sound from the man. Jim was hardly breathing. Fontaine must not have been breathing at all, for the only sound in all that jet-black universe was the shallow in-and-out wheezing of old Hank Albano, still unconscious somewhere off to Jim's right.

There was not another breath in that dark room, not the faintest rustle of clothing, or the squeak of a boot. Seconds dragged into minutes, minutes into hours, it seemed. The waiting began to grind on Jim Flood's taut nerves. Listening became labor, and sweat rolled down his back from his neck, cold as winter rain. An impulse surged up in him to yell and jump —to sprawl out into that hateful, choking, unstirring darkness, and take a chance on finding Fontaine. But he knew it would be suicide. He clenched his fists until his nails cut into his flesh. He sank his teeth into his lip to keep from crying out.

And then, suddenly, straight before him in that pitch black void, there was a bursting out of long-held breath—an explosive coughing up of long-held air from lungs that could hold it no longer. Jim Flood was flexed. His muscles crying out for action. His ears gauged the distance, and he leaped into the vast gulf of darkness, like a night hawk pouncing upon his prey.

Fontaine must have heard, or sensed, his coming, for as Jim leaped, an explosion shattered the silence and the darkness. The orange-blue flame lanced the black plush darkness, and in its flash Jim had a split-second's glimpse of the engineer, still kneeling where he'd been when Jim kicked the light out. His face was twisted and distorted from hate or fear.

A heavy club seemed to smash into Jim's shoulder, turning him halfway around. Then the top of his head collided with the yielding flesh and bone of the kneeling man's face. Fontaine grunted heavily and went over backward. Jim Flood landed on top of him, knocking the air from his lungs with his driving, punishing knees.

With grim, deadly resolve, Jim Flood sank his fingers into the thick neck under him. His fingers clawed at the soft flesh until they had encircled the hard, tubular windpipe. Then he clamped down and waited, impassive and relentless as death.

THIS was the moment for which Jim Flood had been waiting for two long months—the moment when he could choke the life from the man who had killed his father. The moment when he could hold between his fingers the forces which had brought destruction to his valley, and crush them, as he'd crush a fly. His dormant hate and all the bitter frustration of the past months arose in him now to choke and blind him. He couldn't have broken the death hold of his fingers on Fontaine's throat, if he'd wanted to.

And long after the man beneath him had ceased to struggle—hours after the lungs had ceased to strain for one more breath of life, Jim Flood sat in the darkness with the dead, like an image cast in heavy iron, his grip unbroken.

When at last he did stir, he left the body on the floor and walked to the door and opened it. The moon was looking over the edge of the rimrocks, lighting up the world. The world was dead, also, and the moon was keeping its wake, bathing it in a pale sallow light.

He heard Hank Albano's breathing deepen in the darkness of the room behind him, like the breathing of a sleeper who is awakening. Grateful for something to busy his restless hands, he turned and went in to the old man, to help him if he could.

VII

"HOW'D you find this place in the dark las' night?" Jim Flood asked Hank next morning, after he'd gotten the old man's wounds tied up and could see that he would not die. "Did you follow me up?"

The old lawman grunted a negative. "Nawp. I had this robbers' roost cabin spotted a long time ago, only I couldn't never find nobody to home. So, after you lit out, headed this way, I tended to some bizness I had in town an' rode for here. I figgered Logan would have guards posted down the crack, so I dropped down from the rim. I heard all them two turkey buzzards said, about how they'd cooked up this deal between 'em. An' when they started talkin' about kidnappin' Lisbeth Dancey, I got so close to the window to hear that I let Wash see me. An' that was damn' near fatal."

Jim Flood nodded. He was secretly glad that the lawman had overheard that conversation. He knew no man would ever believe a story like that from his own lips. But he said nothing.

Jim had found his horse near the cabin earlier that morning, and he had brought Hank's horse down from the cedar grove up on the rim, where Hank had anchored it the night before. He helped the old sheriff into his saddle, then mounted his own stolen animal, grimacing at the pain that knifed through his bullet-wounded shoulder when he moved.

"If you think you can make it now, Hank," he said dully, pointing his horse up toward the rim, "Why I'll be ridin'. Reckon I'll be doin' a lot of ridin' from here out."

The lawman looked at him, speculatively. "Jim, I'd kind of figgered you'd ride back to town with me."

Flood shook his head. "Nawp. Sorry, Hank. But I ain't goin' back to Dancey's jail. Maybe I deserve it, but I ain't goin'. Maybe Dancey'd make it easy on me, now. But I aim to make it easy on myself, instead. There's nothin' much around here for me now, anyhow, Hank. And it's a cinch there won't be much in ranchin' here, for anybody, with Dancey on top of the pile. So—"

"I was tryin' to tell you, Jimmy," Albano said, "that the way things is run around here from now on will be purty much up to you." And he beamed with pleasure at the wonder in Jim Flood's eyes. "Yu' see, Jimmy, there was somethin' you said yestiday in Sam's office that I couldn't swaller. I'd knowed ol' Dan Flood all his natural life. I knowed that he was a cow man before anything else, an' that he'd fight to the last ditch to hold his own range.

"But I knowed he had a lot of wrinkles in his horns, too, Jimmy. I knowed he was a mighty canny man when it come to bizness. So I couldn't figger Dan turnin' his back on a gold find, an' leavin' it for someone else to stumble on to an' clean up on. That would of been askin' for this very thing to happen which has, Jimmy. An' I figgered Dan wouldn't want that.

"I went to the land office after you'd left town las' night, an' snooped around, back in the books. Shore enough, Jimmy, I found where yore pa had filed on that whole Blind Bull section, ten years ago. Not just the gulch, but the whole damn' country around, which includes about all the diggin's in this valley.

"When I called the recorder on it, why he scratched his ball head an' remembered. He said yore pa did make that filin', an' he proved it up with a line cabin there. Said Dan asked him not to say anything about his filin' at the time. He didn't want to attract attention to the gold then, I reckon. He didn't mention any strike to the recorder or agent, an' they both jus' plumb natchurally forgot it.

"Then, when this here man-stampede busted, they was so busy aroun' that office they couldn't go back-loggin' on every filin' to make shore it was all free ground. They figgered every man would be lookin' out for hisself, an' that any claim-jumpin' would be reported to them.

"I reckon yore pa didn't force that claim when the rush first started, 'cause he still didn't want to advertise that gold around. Anyhow, he had the place sewed up all right, an' I guess he was layin' low an' hopin' nobody would stumble onto the strike. Then, when Dancey come along an' struck it rich there, yore pa was dead. He couldn't say nothin' then.

"But she's all staked an' filed in the

Flood name, Jimmy. The whole shebang. She's all yourn!"

Jim Flood sat quiet, stunned. Then a slow grin broke over his bruised, blood-stained face. For he was thinking he could shove Sam Dancey off the range, now. He could just say, "Pack up your sack, Sam, an' pull your freight!" And Dancey would have to do it. Jim thought of that and nothing else. He knew that he'd been wrong about the man. But he still had little love for him.

"Does Sam know?" he asked, covertly. "How'd he take it?"

"Take it?" Hank echoed. "Why, how you think? R'arin' an' a-snortin', on his hind laigs. But when he seen there was nothin' he could do, why he got down off his high horse. Says he's ready to pack up tomorrow. Says he only hopes you'll buy the equipment he sunk a lot o' dust into, instead of takin' it all over with the ground, as yu' could under the lawr.

"But, shucks, Jimmy, I tol' him you was no miner, an' you'd likely want somebuddy who knew how to run the workin's yet. Tol' him I didn't know where you'd find a better man than him.

"I says to him, Jimmy," the old man added, experimentally, watching Jim from the corners of his eyes, " 'Sam,' I says, 'Jimmy likely would take you in as pardner—maybe fifty-fifty. Why,' I says, 'That would be about fair, Sam, what with you openin' that vein an' workin' it for Jimmy an' all. Anyhow,' I says, 'You developed 'er, Sam, an' Jimmy, he ain't no damn' fool. He'd want the man who runs his mine to have a part interest in it, just to be shore it gits run right. An' anyhow,' I says, last, 'It wouldn't surprise me none to see Jimmy a-weddin' inta yore fambly, what with that gal o' yorn lookin' at him like she does, an' him actin' she was somethin' good to eat.'

"That's what I says to him, Jimmy."

Jim Flood got the drift of the old man's words, and his mind went to Lisbeth Dancey. And through his veins, as he thought of her in this new light, there crept a deep, impelling thrill.

Jim Flood sat quiet on his horse for a long time. Then his slow grin broke again. "I never fancied gold ranchin' much, Hank. But—well, hell. When do we start for town?"

"Directly, Jimmy. Directly. There is somethin' I haven't told you yet. You'll have to stand trial for conspiracy to rob the treasure coach, because charges has already been filed. But feelin' has changed some down there about you, son. An' ol' Peace John McColley who used to run the Rockin' Chair is the judge around town. John will give you a good try, Jimmy."

"Hank," Jim said with sudden, covert interest, "That new-fangled, square-bitted gun I took from Dancey down in his office las' night. Was it loaded?"

"Like a cannon, Jimmy," the lawman affirmed. " 'Nuff lead in it to have done for six men. I was relieved when I went into the stage office an' found you'd only knocked that cross-eyed hombre down with it, 'stead of shootin' him, as you might, 'cause murder is a nasty charge, Jimmy, no matter how many mines you get. What you grinnin' at, Jimmy?"

"Nothin'," Jim Flood lied, considering the bluff Lisbeth Dancey had run on him there in the stage office. "Nothin' a-tall. Just grinnin'. . . ."

THEY still talk of the case of the Territory of Wyoming versus James Flood, up in Hungry Valley. Peace John McColley who heard the case ruled right off that no jury would be necessary because the court had already made up its mind on the Flood affair, and didn't need the opinion of twelve outsiders on it.

But Archie (Slim) Pickens, the county prosecutor, entertained equally firm convictions. Pickens was a lean, cadaverous man with high, throbbing temples and a hooked vulture nose. In his twenty years in office, Slim Pickens had never won a case for the Territory, and he was extremely popular with his constituents.

Pickens had no election to worry about for a whole year when the Flood case turned up on the docket, however, and he was determined, as he put it, to make an example of Jim Flood.

"You are kind of tardy with that, Slim," Peace John argued, off the bench, of course. "Jimmy's done made a example of his own self, an' one the rest of us could follow with some profit." But Pickens wasn't convinced.

Star witness for the prosecution was Lisbeth Dancey. Since Sam Dancey had found it expedient that his stage make the Blind Bull run on that particular day, neither the driver nor the cross-eyed guard was in town to testify. Lisbeth thus was the only actual eye-witness to events which transpired on that fatal day, and much weight was attached to her word.

Lisbeth's face was flushed but her voice was clear and vibrant as he told in detail how Jim Flood had wrestled with the coach tongue at great personal risk to keep the outfit from plunging into Seven Devils Gorge, with her and all the gold inside it.

"He saved my life," she said, "and he saved the gold shipment from the scrupleless men who waited for it to fall down into the canyon."

The judge had to threaten to clear the court room, then, unless order were restored, immediately.

Testimony from Sam Dancey and Hank Albano completed the case, for and against. Dancey ruled himself incompetent as a witness, because of business affiliations with the charged. But he added that it didn't look right-side-up to him that Jim Flood would plot to rob the treasure coach since he owned the gulch and the dust, anyhow. Hank Albano ruled himself competent, and verified Lisbeth's interpretation of happenings on the dug road, with a few touches of his own.

And with all testimony in and considered, the judge ordered James Flood to stand on his legs and receive the verdict of the court. Jim stood, and Peace John fixed him with his pale, jaundiced eye.

"It is the opinion o' this here court that you committed the crimes with which you are charged, Jimmy Flood," the judge glowered. And you could have heard a pin drop in that crowded room.

"But," the court resumed, "Considerin' all the evidence as given, we won't find you guilty, this time. *Case dismissed!*"

Tumult broke loose again, and the court made no effort to curb it until Slim Pickens stepped forward and shouted into the judge's ear. Peace John pounded for order, and got it.

"The public persecutor asks me to announce that he wants to make the opinion o' this court unanimous," Peace John said when he could be heard. "Slim says the drinks will be on him in the South Paw bar quick as this court adjourns, which it does now, by grab!"

Jim Flood and the judge and the prosecutor, and old Hank and Sam Dancey all were carried bodily to the saloon in honor of the occasion; and criers went to arouse the town with word of Pickens' charitable offer at the bar.

Jim Flood and the forces of the law were pledged many times by the glasses of men whom Jim was proud to count among his friends again. But Jim got away as quick as he decently could. He was anxious to find somebody. And he found her on the courthouse stoop, where she had been waiting for him.

Lisbeth Dancey's eyes lighted when she saw him coming and she flushed because she was afraid Jim would guess that she had been waiting for him to come. But if Jim had any such thoughts he didn't betray them. Jim was too fussed and self-conscious about his own coming there, what with so many men drinking his health and luck over in the bar, and demanding his presence there.

Jim saw that Sam Dancey had followed him then, and he was glad of the out thus offered him. "I figured we-all would have bizness to talk over, since we are pardners now," he lied, addressing himself to Sam. "An' I wanted to thank you both for speakin' of me as you did in court. Reckon I didn't deserve it.

"About the pardnership, Sam, I guess there will be legal problems, an' all—"

Sam Dancey looked from Jim to his daughter, and chuckled dryly. Sam Dancey had lost half a fortune in those last days. But he still had more than he could use. Anyhow, he was a broad-minded man, with an eye for good family connections. He had always hoped his daughter would marry well.

"I reckon the biggest legal stickler could be settled in a minute," he said gravely. "By a preacher."

And then he left them to it, and crossed over the street again toward the saloon. He was thinking he might buy a drink himself.

The Kid's gun roared twice, and old Lem slumped over the freshly-dug grave.

TRIGGER FEVER

By John G. Pearsol

He left Limpia a grief-eyed gun-stripling, marked with the outlaw brand. Now he was back to tally a blood debt with man-size irons.

LEM HURLEY, eyes dimmed with tears, lifted his grizzled head slowly from looking at the new-made mound at his feet. He watched the slow solemn march of horsemen and buckboards filing from the graveyard. Slowly surprise widened his eyes as he looked at the youth that stood across the mound

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from him. His brow furrowed and his hand went out appealingly as he watched the wild, unreasonable rage flare in the eyes of young Cal Hurley.

"Why—why Cal," he said unsteadily, "what's the matter?"

The younger man's body leaned tensely forward. Young Cal waved a quick, nervous hand eloquently at the mound at his feet.

"What's the matter?" he asked, rage shaking his voice. "What's the matter? There! That's the matter. My mother. She's dead. An' it's yore fault!"

His fist clenched and he raised it, shook it fiercely in the face of old Lem Hurley. "You an' yore dam' investments! Losin' every cent we had in the world. Losin' the home that Ma worked her life out to help yuh pay for. Leavin' it. Leavin' everything. Makin' her work her heart out again because yuh wanted more than any man oughta have. That's what's th' matter. You killed her!"

"Why, son, I only wanted to—" Lem Hurley began.

Young Cal smiled coldly. "Uh-huh," he went on icily, "I sabe what yuh wanted. Yuh wanted wealth instead o' just a ranch. Yuh wanted power. Yuh wanted every dam' cow critter in Texas. Yuh didn't give a hang who it killed to git it!"

Young Cal stepped back. His thin lips grew straight. Clear and blue, his eyes glowed with an icy flame. "An' one thing more, Mister Hurley—don't call me son! After Ma died I found some stuff in her things. You ain't my father. Yo're my step-dad. My name ain't Hurley. I don't know what it is, but I'm glad I ain't related to a dirty woman-killin' skunk like you!"

Lem Hurley's bronzed face whitened. He watched the wild fire play in the eyes of young Cal. He threw out his hand again in a gesture of appeal. He took a step forward.

Cal, voice high, insane with rage, screamed at Lem Hurley as the older man's feet came atop the soft earth of the grave between them.

"Git off," he yelled fiercely. "Git off that grave!" His hand swept up. The gun in it, steady, menacing Lem Hurley. "You—"

Shocked, grief stricken, puzzled and bewildered, old Lem floundered in the soft earth. His gnarled, work-calloused hand brushed the gun that hung under his coat. The iron in the hand of young Cal spat fire. Old Lem staggered, and with blood on his lips, fell face downward in the soft earth that covered the dead form of his wife.

FOR an instant, remorse glared in the blue eyes of Cal Hurley. He looked at the grizzled head that lay so still on the soft ground. He listened to the clump of broncs' feet as the ones who had just left the cemetery pounded back toward the scene of the tragedy. Then his shoulders straightened. The hate came into his face again.

"An' that," he said to the unconscious man, "oughta do for you. But if it don't, I'll be back. If you ever git a spread again, I'll strip it clean. If yo're lucky enough to live, I'll make you poor an' poverty stricken all the rest of yore damn life."

Eyes straight ahead, gun still before him, he turned on the group of stunned horsemen who had pounded up. He gestured caution, with his gun. Warily, he stepped beside them and took their guns from holsters.

"I just made a promise," he said when finished. "You heard it. I meant every word I said!"

And then these seam-faced, hard-riding, two-fisted cowmen watched a boy who had just buried his mother, and who, as they supposed, had just killed his father, ride away to his own damnation. They didn't chase him. And as the straight-backed form of young Cal Hurley topped the rise that dipped into Lympia canyon, they raised old Lem's grizzled head.

The old man opened his eyes feebly, smiled whimsically. "I shot myself," he whispered, "by accident. It wasn't Cal." He watched their faces anxiously.

Nobody contradicted him.

BUT old Lem Hurley had the kind of iron in his system that makes a man come up when he's down. He had the kind of hickory in his frame that makes a ranny whip dollars out of scrawny,

long-horned cattle, and prospering ranches out of sage brush and sand. So, a few years after young Cal shot Lem, the old man had a ranch again. A ranch with plenty of cattle on it. A ranch that was rodded by an old man with snow-white hair and a puckery scar on his chest; a man who often looked longingly toward the South where the out-rider trail dips from rim-rock to the flats of Candaleria.

He had watched the trail that came from the South, while his herds were growing to big proportions. But now the herds were dwindling away, and he saw the Southward bound tracks of many a critter that wore the Bar-O brand. Soon those cattle would be down where brands don't make an awful lot of difference. And old Lem Hurley wondered if young Cal was keeping his word.

While he wondered, others on the persecution range wondered, too. They wondered who this new name was that was cropping up from the South. A new name that linked itself with the mysterious disappearance of the cattle, not only from the range of old Lem Hurley, but from the ranches of all the Persecution district. A name that meant fast guns and death: the Candaleria Kid!

THE trail from the South. The trail from the land of smooth gun hammers, of wet cow critters, where men who were hunted rode mostly at night. Up this trail, eyes watching through the dusk ahead, rode the Candaleria Kid. Easily, lightly, he sat his kak—and was careful.

The Kid knew this country. Knew it to be the place from which he had fled eight years ago, leaving an old man with a hole in his chest draped across a new-made grave. But that didn't bother the Kid so much. He had another mission. One that he had kept to himself since leaving the land of the big curve. He never spoke of it. But often asked a question which had led to the answer:

"A tall, dark gent? One that throws his left hand across his face when he flips his iron? No, brother, I ain't seen no jasper like that."

Then the Candaleria Kid would ride on again. Always looking — watching for something—for someone. And now as he neared the land of the Limpia district, his eyes, that were so clear and blue, became smoke swirled. He rode easier in his saddle than he had down where the law never comes.

Up from the Limpia Canyon he rode. Topped the Sierra Madras. He stiffened in his kak leather. Unslinging the binoculars from behind his saddle the Kid raised them to his eyes and watched.

A small herd of cattle, with mixed brands, came slowly toward the end of the climb that would dip them into the canyon. Among them were Bar-O brands, and brands of the XX. The Kid saw several. Behind them, no hurry in their movements, came six waddies. Their broncs, the Kid saw, were all Bar-O branded. A mixed herd, headed south, driven by Bar-O punchers. Mirthlessly, the Kid grinned.

That meant that Lem Hurley was after power again. That he didn't care how he got it. The Kid was glad he hadn't killed the old walrus. He'd have a chance to do it all over again. But the Kid's brow furrowed. Hurley was, always had been, honest. The Kid knew it. There was coyote smell in the wolf pack here.

OUT from the draw that intersected the trail taken by the herd, a puncher, riding unhurriedly, came toward the men driving the cattle. They seemed perturbed by his appearance. One, a tall, dark-faced gent spoke low voiced to his companions. Three of them rode at a trot to intercept the newcomer. The Kid saw the stranger's bronc was branded with a double X.

As he came near the three that rode to meet him he eased himself in his saddle and watched the cattle driven by the others. The Kid saw him point with a quick gesture at the small herd. The three who had ridden to meet him made quick motions with their right hands. In the shadows of the sinking sun, the fire from their guns blazed redly. The Double-X puncher weaved in his saddle. Wildly, his bronc reared, spun on its hind legs and dashed away, followed by the racing shooting punchers who rode the Bar-O horses.

As they pounded away the Kid heard

the tall man, who appeared the leader though he had stayed with the herd, shouting, "Get Carter!"

They vanished in the fog of dust and shadows. The Kid watched and soon they came back. The tall leader appeared satisfied by what the others told him. Two of them took up the work of hazing the cattle on toward the canyon rim. Four of them waved to the two, then rode away. The Kid watched them out of sight then took up his ride toward Persecution. He wished he had seen the dark-faced leader throw a gun. Maybe—well—he'd see.

There was ice in his eyes as he rode Northward. The Kid had other business in Persecution country besides watching a pack of rustlers.

SATURDAY night at Persecution. A different cowtown of Persecution than the one where young Cal Hurley had shot his step-dad eight years ago.

Grim and gaunt, men on the streets kept their hands near guns that slapped their thighs. Their eyes were watchful, suspicious, like range wolves watching the pack close in on a kill too small for all.

No smiles on their lips as they took their drinks at "Solemn Henry's." Only curt nods for greeting when men, silent, grim, cold-eyed, stepped in to the bar. They didn't talk.

The sound of galloping hoofs came to the saloon. Hilarious yells. Shots. The hoof beats came closer.

Gato Simms, the tall, leathery owner of the Double-X, stood with his back to the bar and grunted. The place was so silent, he didn't have to talk very loud to be heard distinctly.

"Bar-O," he said, in a voice that was a mixture of resentment and suspicion. "They allus come hell a-whoopin'."

The broncs pounded up to the front of Solemn Henry's. Spurs clinked outside. Hank Bruno, squat, chunky, owner of the "Jingle Bob," spoke up.

"Lem Hurley," he said musingly, but with a tinge of resentment in his voice. "Bar-O. He ain't got no more critters either. How come his bucks is allus whoopin'?"

Eyes still on the door, Gato Simms spoke gruntingly. "Humph," he said, "Where *is* Hurley? I ain't seen him since all this hell started—since all this stealin'—killin'. How come he needs so many darn' . . ."

The doors snapped open. Four gents, easy striding, heady, swaggering, stepped in to the bar. They were four of the six who had been with the cattle—those the Kid had watched out near Lympia Canyon. They all nodded, apparently at everybody, and grinned as they did it—a trifle mockingly.

One by one they lined against the bar, lifted glasses. Clint Farley, the tall, dark leader, was first. Argo Samson, skinny, pale blue eyes, second. Then Keller and Kincaid, both stone-faced, expressionless. Killers all.

The doors slapped open again. Through them, a man hit the room, staggering. His hat off. His head was bloody. The yellow lamps glinted golden on the gun in his hand. Another stain, red and spreading on his chest, told of his desperate hurry.

"Carter!" gasped Gato Simms. "What the devil?"

CARTER stumbled forward. Farley, Argo, Keller and Kincaid set their glasses down. They did it easily. They turned around. Carter was falling forward. Almost imperceptibly, Farley nodded to Kincaid. Gato Simms and Kincaid stepped forward. Carter was on the floor. Gato leaned over him.

"They got me," gasped Carter, "I played dead, come on—I—it—Lem Hurley's stuff from all—"

Blood stopped his throat. Ever so slightly, Kincaid shrugged, turned back to Farley. All four lined against the bar, seemingly negligent.

Up from over Carter, Gato Simms stood up straight. Leather, brown stone, and fire, Gato leaned forward. He looked at Farley, Hurley's man, a Bar-O man.

"Carter said 'Lem Hurley,'" he said low voiced, "But Carter's dead. He can't talk no more." Gato waited.

Farley smiled with his lips. But his eyes, black and smoldering, didn't smile. "That's too bad," he said.

Slowly, Gato Simms stepped back. Beside Hank Bruno, he stopped. Stood

still and watched Farley. Bruno watched too, like Gato did. Nobody got between Gato and Farley.

"Carter's dead," said Gato again. He waited a second.

"Uh-huh," said Farley. There was no tone at all in his voice.

"He meant somethin' by sayin' 'Lem Hurley,'" went on Gato. "Mebbe he meant that stuff from all the spreads is goin' out by Lem Hurley's Lympia Canyon way. Mebbe he meant he'd got the deadwood on the Bar-O."

Still looking like he waited, Gato Simms stopped. Hank Bruno turned down the corners of his mouth.

"Uh-huh," he said softly, "Where *is* Hurley? How come he's got so many good gun hands? *We* don't need 'em. We ain't got no cattle anymore. An' accordin' to appearances the Bar-O ain't got none either. Mebbe yuh better talk, Farley. What *did* Carter mean?"

Farley slid a little farther away from Keller. Kincaid showed his teeth, in neither a grin nor a grimace, as he sidled away from Argo Samson.

There was a lot of silence. Nobody noticed a young fellow sliding up from the rear of the room. A young ranny who had listened avidly to the talk between Gato and Farley. His boots hadn't come out of a factory box. And his spurs were silver. He watched the tableau near the bar. There were smoke swirls in the eyes of the Candaleria Kid as he weeded through the crowd—toward Gato and Hank Bruno.

So this Carter gent was the one who had been shot up on the range, eh? And where *was* Lem Hurley? Maybe the Kid had been a little hasty in judging the old man after all. There seemed to be a nigger in the woodpile somewhere. This Farley gent—he was tall—he was dark—but did he throw his left hand up to his face when he flipped his gun? The Kid eased forward, watching Farley.

Farley's lips curved a little as he watched Gato. "Takin' it all in all," he breathed, "Yo're a low-down liar, Gato!"

MIXING with the exhalation of breaths, with the scrape of steel on leather, with the glinting flicker of yellow lamps on guns, was the forward leap of the Candaleria Kid. Shouldering a man away, he leaped beside Gato and Bruno. His guns were out. They blazed with the others. Blazed as a shotgun roared from behind the bar and the lights went out. The blast of fire roared, blazed just once, and died.

Out of the darkness, a voice yelled shrilly: "Gato! Damnation! Here's yore rustler—th' Candaleria Kid!"

Clutching fingers, reaching out of the darkness, grabbed at the Kid's throat. Upward, with a swishing surge, the Kid's hands flew, knocked the hands from him as he twisted sidewise.

Gato and Bruno. Keller and Argo Samson. Kincaid, Farley, all of them, took up the cry, "Git him! The Candaleria Kid!"

In the darkness, gun butts crunched on heads. Fists flailed. Storming sidewise, Gato and Bruno grabbed and hit. Ducking, dodging, the Kid's guns rose and fell. Men groaned when he hit them. Then they didn't move again. He fought toward the door. And made it.

Hot death swarmed after him as he slapped the doors open. It plucked at his shirt. Tore at his side. It picked at the rump of his bronc as he leaped to leather. It whistled its thwarted song in his ears as he pounded down the street of Persecution toward Lem Hurley's Bar-O. And, as he rode, the Kid cursed the bartender in Solemn Henry's who had shot out the light with his scatter gun before the Kid had an opportunity of seeing Farley draw his gun.

AHEAD of the rest of them, Farley and Keller—all of Hurley's men, came into the street. Waving a gun wildly in the air, Farley, the tall dark leader of Bar-O, motioned in the opposite direction taken by the Candaleria Kid.

"Two ways," he yelled to Gato Simms, "Yuh take that one. We'll go to'ards the Bar O. One of us'll be sure to git him."

The Bar-O men pounded after the Candaleria Kid. Cut cruelly by spurs their broncs labored. Stones flew up from the loose sand and fell again when

the feet that kicked them were a mile down the trail.

Well out of Persecution. Farley yelled at his three followers. "Lucky that buck showed up," he called above the pound of hoofs, "but we gotta git him. The Candaleria Kid is Lem Hurley's brat. He'll head for home." Then they rode—rode like the devil was after them.

Young Hurley, the Candaleria Kid, hurried too. He burned over the sand; scorched through the mesquite. Thorns, with their needle-like lances, stabbed at him, cut his boots. Rocks, yucca, whizzed past as if thrown from a catapult. Like a raging storm, the wind rushed at him.

Momentarily, when his pursuers topped a rise, were in relief against a splotch of gray in the sky, the Kid saw that they were four. That would be Farley and his three killers. Mirthlessly the Kid grinned as he pounded on.

Then, in the blackness ahead of him, a blot of gray. A ranch house. The Bar-O. Off running before his bronc plunged to a halt. Inside the house. It was empty, dark, deserted. Where was Lem Hurley? Out again and down the incline into the storm cellar, plunged the Kid. The door was locked. Flame scorched his face, thunder shook his ear drums as he blew the lock with a shot from his gun.

INSIDE, a chain rattled in the darkness. The Kid struck a match. At the end of the dug-out, a white haired old man sat on a box. He had arm bands of iron on his wrists. They were crudely rivetted on, bolted at the ends of the confining chains to the log uprights at the top of the underground room.

Like live coals out of a dead and withered face, old man Hurley's eyes tried to look behind the lighted match young Cal held in his hand.

In a voice that was dead, the old man asked, "Who are you?"

The match went out. Young Cal's breath sounded raspy. It mixed with the ghostly rattle of chains.

"Yo're not one of 'em," old Hurley's voice came again, positive this time, "but if yuh know Gato, Bruno, or any of the ranchers, go git 'em. These hellions, they got me foul. Keep me chained here. They'd kill me only I sign checks, sign papers to make things look natural. They're gettin' rich. They're strippin' the range. Mine an' everybody's. Git goin'!"

So here was the answer to "where was Hurley." His own step-dad chained, imprisoned like an animal. The Kid felt a surge of pity. Banished now, all the hate that he knew to be foolish, wrong, absurd. Faintly, the drum of hoofs came to him. He'd have to leave.

Out again he dashed. Hoof thunder coming closer—Farley! Into the kak again he leaped. Death whispered in his ears. Hate flamed from the guns of Farley, Kincaid, Keller and Argo. Then the wind rushed at him again. He drew away from the four behind him. He'd make the play, fetch Gato and Bruno. He'd clean the slate. His spurs raked his bronc cruelly.

The thunder of pursuit sank to whispers. The moon peeped out from behind a cloud. It bathed the land in silver, while it watched Cal Hurley beat the shadows that raced behind him. Then suddenly, while he pounded forward, his guns came out. He swerved, went around a herd of cowstuff that loomed before him. Two punchers were pushing it.

They cut in to flag him. Their guns spouted red. Cal's answered. One of the two crashed off his bronc. The other came on. Cal slowed, steadied, shot. Missed. The other turned. Cal swung about. He shot again. Farley's thunder came closer now. Cal shot at the one fleeing horseman—got him—raced on again. On through the little herd he rode recklessly. The moon showed its face. The cattle bawled, bucked over the country, scattered. Cal saw some brands as he passed through them. It was the same bunch that had passed early in the evening while he watched from the canyon rim.

He headed off some racing cattle, cut in on them, swung their heads. Farley and his three killers came closer. The Kid had to cut and run. His bronc was tired, winded. But Farley's was too.

The Kid headed back. He swung in a circle, back toward the Bar-O. He had a plan—if the cattle didn't scatter.

"HATING himself as he did it, remorse in his heart for his act, the Candaleria Kid nearly killed his bronc in the mad race over the back track. Legs spread apart, quivering, unsteady, it panted agonizedly as he bucked it to a halt in the Bar-O ranch yard.

Into the ranch house Cal raced. Then in a moment out again, a snaky trail of smoke in his wake. Into the bunk house and out again. Tinder dry, the two buildings flared into flame—flame that threw a blood red glare into the inky sky. A glare that could be seen for miles. That would bring Gato and his posse pounding toward the Bar-O. Maybe that would bring them past the herd of cattle with the two dead men lying stark and still beside it. A big gamble, but the Kid took it. He ducked into the dug-out as the flames crackled.

Into the light of the blaze, with a pound of hoofs, Farley and his killers dashed up. The Kid's gun spat from the dug-out doorway. Keller's bronc reared, crashed on it's nose. Keller raced into the darkness as Farley, Kincaid and Argo snapped lead into the maw of the Kid's shelter. Then they ran beyond the light circle.

Farley, out of sight, barricaded behind the bronc corral, called loudly to the Kid.

"Hey," he yelled, "come on out. Git outa the country an' we'll leave yuh go."

Waiting, the Kid leaned against the doorpost.

"We'll git yuh shore as hell!" came Farley's warning.

The chains rattled in the darkness. "Go ahead," advised old Hurley. "They'll git yuh. They'll do it. Go ahead, yuh can't do no good anyway."

"Shut up," the Kid said.

Keller called to Farley, "Mebbe we got him," he suggested.

"He's dead," called Argo, "that volley got him."

"If he ain't, he soon will be," Farley called back to them. "Wait a minute."

The flames roared from the burning buildings like an exploded volcano. The fire and smoke mounted in the sky. Cal grinned as he watched.

"The hellions," grated old Hurley, "they've fired the place." Then to the Kid—"Say, who are you anyway?"

The Kid grinned, shot savagely at the flashes that stabbed at him. Would Gato Simms and Bruno come? Had they seen the fire? And had they stopped to see the cattle?

"Th' Candaleria Kid," he said to Hurley.

"Proud t' know yuh," called Hurley through the darkness. "Give 'em hell!"

OUT of Persecution, riding a blind trail, Gato Simms, rode with Bruno at the head of twenty riders. The rumble of their bronc's hoofs mounted, swelled to reverberating thunder. At a hint from Farley they chased a phantom into the hills. They rode till a haze of red tinged the sky behind them. Gato Simms held up his hand.

"Back-track," he yelled.

That blaze told Simms a lot. It told this wise old big bend ranny that it had been set on purpose because both those glares, far apart, could not have started at the same time. And a blaze, a purposeful one, meant that attention was meant to be attracted.

He thought on what Carter said. On how Kincaid had slid forward when Carter started speaking. And he knew that Farley and his crew wouldn't need help in fighting this one lone Candaleria Kid. It must have been the Kid who had set fire to the buildings. And if he had, there was work to be done—plenty of it.

Back they pounded, rode till a small herd of cattle stampeded when they pounded up. Bruno's bronco leaped high over a form on the ground.

"Whoa," he yelled. "Hi, Gato—lookit!"

They stopped, found two dead men.

"Hurley's riders," Gato pronounced.

Bruno rode his bronc close to a steer. He yelled again at Gato. "Bar-O's" he called. "Double-X's. There's one o' yores, Gato. Hurley's riders have been doin' it. Here's everybody's!"

"Let's ride!"

They pounded toward the Bar-O.

And at the finding of the mixed herd with the two Bar-O punchers beside it, Gato Simms knew something else. He knew that it was the Candaleria Kid who was fighting for and not against the ranchers of the Persecution district. And Gato knew too, had known, that the Candaleria Kid was the son of old Lem Hurley.

SICK, weak, staggering at the door, Cal Hurley heard them coming. Were they after him? Had they read the sign right at the herd? If they had they'd get Farley. If they hadn't they'd get him—Cal Hurley!

Breathless silence for a moment as Farley, Kincaid and Argo heard the rumble of hoofs. Momentarily Farley dodged into the light. The Kid saw him, swung up his gun, then hesitated. Was Farley the killer gent that had come from the big curve badlands? There was only one way to find out. One way before Gato Simms and his posse would come to put their oars in the puddle. The Kid, with an effort, straightened. His guns went back into their holsters. There's where they'd stay till Farley started his draw. That way and that way only would tell the Kid whether or not his trail of vengeance was over.

Weaving drunkenly up the incline of the dug-out door he strode. Hands stiff at his sides, on through the flickering light he stalked. Anxiously Farley looked over his shoulder toward the thunder of hoofs that came swiftly closer. Nervously Kincaid fired at the approaching posse. Argo, from behind the corrals, shot twice at the dim forms that thundered up. Guns roared.

Still the Kid, eyes riveted on Farley, stalked on. Whirling, Farley saw him. He shrilled. Simultaneously, as his right hand swept holsterward, his left hand flew up and crossed his face. Like the leap of a panther the guns of the Kid flashed in the semi-darkness. Fiercely, drumming death at Farley, they flamed. Flamed till Farley, spinning like a dancer, reached imploringly toward heaven, crashed on his face and lay still.

Then, still weaving, stepping unsteadily, unmindful of the gunfire that thundered at the door of the outer end of the yard, the fire from the guns of Gato Simms' posse that swept Kincaid and Argo into oblivion, he made his way into the dug-out again.

The gunfire quieted.

Outside, Gato Simms gestured toward the back door of the dug-out. "In there," he said, "I saw some shootin' outa there."

Bruno took a blazing board. They entered the cellar. The Kid, blood-smeared, head wobbly, grinned up at them from a seat on the floor. Old man Hurley, chains rattling on his arms, shook his fists in the air.

He swore vehemently, "I wait here till I rot on jaspers like you to get me out. But I had to wait till a he-man comes ridin' on the Bar-O spread. Gents, shake with my boy Cal."

Young Cal raised his head quickly. Old man Hurley grinned at him.

There was a twinkle in Gato's eyes. "Glad yo're back, Cal," he said. "We been missin' yuh ever since yuh left—that day yo're pap shot hisself. Yuh gonna stay?"

Cal jerked his eyes accusingly to old man Hurley, who dropped his own and muttered cursingly at the chains that bound his wrists.

"Uh-huh," Cal said softly, "I'm gonna stay on the Bar-O—with Dad."

Hank Bruno scratched his grizzled head as he looked quizzically about the smoke filled room. "I wonder," he said tonelessly, "what's become o' this Candaleria Kid gent? Seems I heard a fella holler somethin' about him?"

Old Hurley snorted. "Him? he said, "he's dead. Cal's been tellin' me about that jasper. Killed about a year ago. Now git outa here an' find somethin' to take these shackles offa me!"

Gato went out with Bruno.

"Funny," said Gato," a gent *will* make mistakes, won't he? I'd a swore I heard somebody say young Cal Hurley was the Candaleria Kid. Musta been dreamin'."

"Ears bad," Bruno said. "Where is there a monkey wrench to git them dang bracelets offa Lem?"

THE COYOTE KID

By ART LAWSON

Three hands reached for the deck —high card hombre to pull a bushwack trigger. But the cards were stacked, and the Judas bullet boomeranged.

LIMPY OWEN was staging a one-man stampede. He oiled up his old cutter, and loaded it with fresh shells. He loaded himself with a couple of shots of red-eye. Then he piled into his battered kak and headed off his Linked Circle onto the warpath. It led to Ola. He left his horse at the town hostelry. He stormed up and down Ola's main and only street, busting

The Kid stared at the card. "No!" he cried, "I won't do it!"

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in and out of every saloon and store, hunting just one man. He found him in the Cattleman's Club. Thumb Cochrane, Ola's newest and strangest badman, was drinking beer and munching cheese over by the free-lunch counter.

Limpy looked like a banty rooster stalking through the doors. His white hair stuck up like a comb, his red nose made a perfect beak, and all he needed was some feathers on that skinny little frame of his to complete the picture. Thumb wasn't so big either. But he was broad and stocky and young. And the way he glared at Limpy with those gray eyes would have frozen any normal person. Anybody but Limpy Owen.

"You been stealing my cows!" Limpy yelled at him, stopping in the middle of the room, hunching his shoulders.

"That ain't news," Cochrane answered agreeably enough. "I told you all about it last night." He stood there staring at Limpy, an amused expression beginning to come in his eyes. But you could almost see the chip on his shoulder when he ended up: "An' furthermore, I'm goin' to go swipe some more of yore cows."

That was as much as Limpy could stand. Last night he'd taken Thumb's "promise" to hook a few head as a hoorawing. It seems Thumb had been serious. And now he flaunted the robbery in his victim's face! "Thief," Limpy shrieked in his high, cracked voice—and dove for his smoke-pole.

But Cochrane got there first. His right gun flicked up. One slug zipped out of the muzzle, cut through Limpy's upper arm, and smacked dully into the wall. Limpy howled with the pain, dropped his own gun unfired.

SMOKE cleared. Hastily jerked six-guns were repouched cold. And except for the men bunched around the long bar talking in excited tones, peace dropped again on the Ola Cattleman's Club. These men knew the two gun slingers intimately. They knew of the feud between Limpy Owen and the young farmer, Thumb Cochrane. They had seen the tight feeling grow. But no one had expected any gun play.

The drouth of early summer started it. Cochrane, a nester, had run a nice little plot out near Limpy's Linked Circle spread. He supplied the town with milk and eggs and butter. Even though he was a nester he seemed to be a pretty decent sort of chap and everyone in the section liked him.

The dry weather cleaned out his crops. A couple of marauding coyotes killed most of his chickens. And to top it off, the following Saturday night while Cochrane was in town telling the boys of his misfortunes, his peaceful little dairy herd went on a rampage and got themselves torn up in his barbwire fence or fell over the edge of a drywash adjoining his property. As a result he had to shoot most of his cows and leave them on the prairie for the buzzards. He put that down to the coyotes and the hot weather too.

Cochrane became some worried over things and one day Limpy offered to buy the place from him. He said he could use Cochrane's fine water hole and would be glad to pay well. But Cochrane wouldn't sell for that price. So Limpy dropped in with a note that Thumb owed him and told him to pay up. Thumb didn't like Limpy's attitude and said so. He told him he didn't have five hundred dollars and he'd be damned if he'd borrow to pay a mug like Limpy Owen.

So Limpy got mad, went into town and fetched Sheriff Beggs, and attached Cochrane's little farm. It was all perfectly legal. Though some said it wasn't exactly fair. Cochrane mooned about for a few days. He looked to be sore as hell. Then suddenly and quietly he disappeared for nearly a week.

When he showed up again he hung around the Ola Cattleman's Club for a while then rode out to Limpy's spread. He ran off a couple of dozen cows and hid them securely. Then he looked up Limpy and told him all about it. Limpy told him he was just a kid trying to get a rep as a badman, and laughed at him. Cochrane swore he wasn't joking, and really had taken the cattle and Limpy kept on laughing.

In the morning Limpy stopped laughing very suddenly when he found a bunch of cows *had* been lifted from the west pasture. And now first blood had been drawn. The feud was taking shape. The Club buzzed with talk.

THAT wasn't the last time someone tried to ventilate Cochrane. Every time he showed up in town he paraded around with a chip on his shoulder. And someone always managed to oblige him, one way or another, by picking a fight. At first he did all his fighting with Limpy. It was all words now between those two, for Limpy had learned a couple of things and kept his cutter in leather. Finally Limpy tried to get the sheriff on Cochrane's tail. But it didn't do any good.

"Why should I lock him up?" old Sheriff Beggs asked him. "Thumb ain't done nothing. You drawed first that time. You can't run him in for that. And you ain't pinned that cow stealin' on him, neither. Ain't got no proof he took them. Just his say-so. An' he's probably lyin' to make you sore. I can't do nothin' until I'm showed who's takin' the critters."

Then some more cows disappeared. But this time they were off Spence Wetherell's Cloverleaf spread. Spence didn't get particularly mad about it but he was determined. He decided right then and there that he wasn't going to let Thumb get away with tricks like that. He expected Thumb to go to the Club that night to boast about it the way he always did when he lifted Limpy's cows. So Spence looked up his little old friend Limpy and the two of them rode into town.

Sure enough Cochrane was there leaning on the bar and talking to the boys. Spence charged in like a tired bulldog and Limpy, with his arm still bandaged, trailed along behind.

"Well," Spence bellied up to Cochrane and began booming at him with his big deep voice, "what have you got to say, young man?"

Thumb looked at Spence, puzzled. "Me? I ain't got anything to say," he began. Then he saw Limpy half hiding in Spence's shadow. "Say," he asked, "has that little wart back there—"

Limpy saw his chance. Spence would make a good fort. So Limpy dove for his gun. Thumb saw him move. He guessed what was going on and made a grab for his hog-leg. Spence saw Thumb snatching and slapped leather. It was all too sudden to tell who shot first but by the time the banging was over, Limpy's wound was torn open again and Spence's right arm was badly in need of a sling. Cochrane was whole. He'd used only two bullets.

Things went on that way for some time. Frank Jordan of the Lazy-J lost some cows and tried to ventilate Cochrane for it. He just wanted to lay Cochrane up so the cowmen could hang him legal. But after the meeting Jordan went alone to call on the doctor. Then his young son Pancho, who had once been one of Cochrane's best friends, took up the fight. He went home and bandaged his arm up with the tail of an old shirt.

And old Sheriff Beggs still claimed that no one had broke no laws—except the ranchmen who tried to shoot a youngster bothered with boasting. Cows still vanished. Thumb Cochrane still talked loud. Something had to be done.

So Limpy Owen, Spence Wetherell, and Frank Jordan decided that they would do it. They sat around for a spell for their wounds to heal and for Beggs to make a move if he was going to. Then they laid some plans. They would meet at Limpy's Linked Circle and discuss things further.

SPENCE, always prompt in his duties, arrived first. He and Limpy sat down on opposite sides of the little square table in the big room of the ranch house and started talking. Limpy wagged his jaw the faster of the two but by the time they were deadlocked Spence had said the only important thing.

"Damn it, Limpy," he boomed. "It ain't what we got to do, but how we're to go about it. Everybody knows Cochrane has been taking the cattle. We got to get solid proof. Then old Beggs will have to arrange for a trial."

"Sure," Limpy agreed. "How're we goin' to get the proof?"

"That's what I don't know," Spence admitted. "Frank and his kid are hunting some. Maybe they'll have an idea." Spence took out a heavy gold watch and looked at it. "Where is Frank?"

In the short silence that followed, while Limpy shrugged his shoulders for answer, both men heard the sound of a horse loping across the prairie. The muffled beat grew louder and then there was a clatter of hoofs in the door-yard.

"Here he is now," Limpy suggested.

But he was wrong. It was young Pancho who came through the door and half stumbled over to the table. The youngster said nothing as he slumped down in the third chair and buried his blond head in his twitching hands. He paid no attention to their curious stares. Somehow the kid didn't seem to fit with those two older men there.

Suddenly he straightened in the chair, looked first at Owen, then at Wetherell.

"I've come to take Pop's place," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Why?" Limpy asked. "Has something happened to Frank?"

"He's dead," Pancho blurted. The little muscles of his face hardened with his effort at control.

"Dead?" Limpy echoed. "Frank?"

"It can't be," Spence said softly. Then he saw the tears in the kid's blue eyes. He reached out and patted Pancho's shoulder. "Buck up, Son," he said lamely.

The youngster turned to Spence for comfort.

"Listen, Spence." His voice was tight. "He was gulched. Shot with his guns cold. Shot in the head an' left there."

"Who in hell . . . ?" Spence growled.

"I don't know." Pancho could still see his father lying flat on his stomach, his face buried in a mess of alkali and blood. Pancho's ears still buzzed with the hum of flies swarming about the dead body. He shuddered. "I found him this afternoon out on the south of our range. He was dead when I found him. An' a steer that someone shot was lying there beside him. I took Pop home across my saddle." The kid's voice stopped with a choked sob. Spence still held the youngster's trembling shoulder.

"A steer," Limpy broke the silence. "What kind? Maybe . . ."

Pancho tried to pull himself together.

"I looked," he said. "But the brand was cut out. But in the meat I could still find sign of Lazy-J. There was a fire there too, for brandin'."

"He musta found someone blotting," Limpy suggested, timidly for him.

Spence swung around in his seat facing his old pard. Spence always got jumpy in a tight. He was fidgety now. He picked up a pack of cards on the table and fumbled senselessly with them.

"Owen," he said heavily. "We can't fool around any longer."

"What do you mean?" Limpy asked.

"First, cows," Spence answered. "Now, Jordan. We've got to get him right off!"

Pancho looked up through blurred eyes.

"What d'you—you mean you think—Cochrane done it?"

"Of course!" he said. "Naturally!"

"Obvious, ain't it?" Limpy added. "Who else?"

FOR a long moment Spence Wetherell sat uneasily in his chair watching the lean young face of Pancho. And Limpy Owen, a shade of concern in his icy eyes, sat watching the pack of cards Spence was fumbling with. Pancho just looked off in the distance, staring vacantly into the ring of shadow outside the light cast by the oil lamp.

Spence tapped his finger on the pine top of the table as if beating time to the toll of a mourning bell. He hitched his chair up closer.

Limpy mumbled: "Damn that thick sheriff!"

"Thumb used to be my pal," said Pancho softly. Then in sudden frenzy he leaped up from his seat, sending the chair crashing behind him. He leaned far over the table, clutching the edges, glaring at the two oldsters—first Limpy, then Spence. His tight lips quivered.

"I'm goin' to kill him," he snapped.

Spence righted the fallen chair with his foot and pushed the excited kid back into it.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "You couldn't do it."

"I tell you I'll get him."

"There's only one way you can do it," Limpy suggested. But before he could explain Spence broke in, voice harsh.

"You mean from behind?"

"No," Pancho cried. "I won't plug a man in the back."

"He didn't give Frank a chance," Limpy said. "Why should we be finicky? We got to do *somethin'*. Cochrane ain't givin' us no choice. We can't play cowboy an' Injun with him."

"I guess Limpy's right," Spence backed him up. "It's dirty, but we're forced into it."

"Anyway *you* don't need to do it, Pan-

cho," Limpy said. "We'll all take a chance. He's hurt all of us." Limpy reached across the table. "Let's have the pack, Spence. We'll draw. High man goes hunting. The rest of us swear Cochrane was killed legal. We'll say we had to shoot in self-defense. High man . . ."

Already Limpy had spread the cards in a blue fan over the table. Already he was pulling out his draw. Spence, too, slid out his little piece of cardboard. Balanced it at the edge of the table. And, as if moving in a dream, Pancho reached out his hand.

"High man does the job," Limpy went on. "Other two back him up. Agreed. What've you got?"

The three men turned their drygulch cards face up. A man was marked for a bushwhacker bullet. And one of three would pull the coward trigger.

Not Limpy. His was the six of hearts. Spence? The eight of spades might be top card. But Pancho, who was young and still had a code of honor, was staring down at the leering face of the Jack of Spades. He stared for a long moment at the one beady eye. He was held tensely cold by the ugly face, the card that wouldn't look him in the eyes. . . .

"God!" he shrieked. "I can't do that!"

"We all took our chance," Spence said hoarsely.

THAT afternoon, sun painted the hills to the west with a misty purple. It beat down on the long grass of the flatlands and sent up the sweet smell of new hay. It warmed young Pancho's back and caused a conflict of emotions inside him. He was hunting for an ex-friend of his. He would shoot his friend as soon as he found him. But just now the warmth of the sun fought against his homicidal intent. He swung slightly in the kak with the movement of his dun cayuse.

Near the road, Jose Olivares was plowing behind a long-legged ox. He looked with pride at the straight furrows he made and took deep breaths of the air heavy laden with the pungent smell of fresh black earth. He'd plant more corn in these furrows come spring. His fat old wife would make tortillas when the corn grew ripe. She'd use the husks for tamales. Old Jose liked the good things his wife cooked for him. He liked everything. He liked life. He never thought of death.

Pancho's horse eased to a halt in the middle of the roadway when his young master pulled slightly on the rein. His boss half turned in the hull.

"Hey there, Jose," Pancho hailed his old Mexican friend. "You seen Thumb Cochrane lately? Has he been down this way?" This was the third day of Pancho's hunt for the badman he was slated to kill. So far he had found no sign until one of the hangers-on at the Ola Cattleman's Club told him that Thumb had been seen around Jose's house. Pancho had come to see for himself.

The Mexican nester stopped his plowing, stood in the rich loam, leaning against his homemade plow.

"*'Sta bueno, Señor Pancho,*" he called back. "Señor Cochrane stay with me little bit. But not for two, three days. He just come down the road ver' few minutes ago. He ride on big black horse. He say, "How are you, ol' frijole?' an' go that way." He gestured vaguely with his brown hand toward the hill-walled edge of the Linked Circles. "Señor Thumb don't say where," old Jose added.

Jose shook his gray head dolorously.

"Jose so sor' to hear about your padre. An' Señor Thumb say to tell you he sad too for Señor Frank."

Pancho's back tautened. "He ought to be sad," he answered with sudden bitterness. "He done the shootin'."

Jose raised his hand in entreaty. "Señor Pancho! It could not be!"

Then, with a fierceness that overwhelmed him, Pancho broke in. "I'm goin' to kill him. I'm gettin' Cochrane!"

The old Mexican stiffened at his plow-handle.

"But Señor Pancho," he yelled. Then he stopped as the big dun horse clattered down the roadway.

PANCHO JORDAN soon found sign on the rim of hills to the west. He followed it south for a couple of miles where he discovered that the horse and rider had been by only a couple of minutes before. Then the tracks doubled around, turned into a small cañon to the right. Pancho studied the trail for a long moment. He could tell that the horse was

a big spirited animal. He had every reason to believe it was Thumb Cochrane's magnificent black.

But Pancho had no intention of trailing Cochrane into the cañon. In the thick underbrush the hunted man had every advantage. If he was blood mad, as everyone said, it would be suicide to take the chance. But the man in there had to come out some time. So Pancho kneed his horse around and cautiously climbed to a high butte overlooking the cañon entrance.

He stretched out flat on his belly behind a fringe of mountain laurel. From time to time he hunkered up on his heels to peer up and down the cañon's length through his binoculars. Or he scanned the lower Lazy-J and upper Linked Circle ranges.

After a while, from the west came the faint rattling of pebbles sliding against one another. Pancho tensed, came to his knees, hugged the glasses to his eyes. He could find no life in the cañon. Nothing moved. Must be a jackrabbit. He couldn't be sure, for the sun was going down now and long shadows were creeping through the lowlands.

The rattling of pebbles came again—closer. It didn't stop this time. It grew louder, sounded now like a steer or a horse ambling along through the loose shale of the cañon bed.

Pancho clicked back the trigger of his Winchester, moved the rifle to a better place, where he could get at it if he needed it quickly. He peered intently through the dark leaves of the laurel, shading the lenses so they wouldn't catch the reflection of the sun sinking below the hills. Something moved in the cañon. Something gray. Pancho felt down for the comforting stock of the rifle.

He could see a man on horse now but couldn't tell who it was. Then the rattling ceased and the man seemed to melt into the purple shadows of the cañon. For long tight minutes Pancho hunkered there motionless. The muscles of his thighs cramped under the strain, and the small of his back burned with the tension. Still he held himself rigid. The gray shadow evolved from the purple ones. The man and horse moved forward.

At the opening of the cañon the rider stopped. Well back in the shadows cast by the lowering sun he raised up in the kak, surveyed the flatlands carefully. Pancho could see him plainly now. Could see the black horse. He knew who the man was.

The bushwhacker laid down the glasses and groped for the Winchester. He felt the smooth stock and the hard barrel. Cautiously he raised it to his shoulder. He was taking no chances of missing. He sighted carefully, slowly. His finger flexed on the trigger.

The low sun had found its way through the thin veil of laurel. It sent a streamer dancing, dazzling on the Winchester foresight. Pancho edged over to escape from the glistening irritation. And the bright, white star became a black blot before his eyes. It hung there like an evil devil when Pancho blinked his eyes to shake it. It wouldn't go. It was black—like the Jack of Spades!

A tight sob constricted Pancho's throat. The one-eyed Jack of Spades was back to torture him. The one-eyed Pancho Jordan. Both did their dirty work behind your back. They couldn't look a man in the eyes! Jack of Spades Jordan. . . . Jack of Spades Jordan had a job to do. . . .

His finger tightened. The gun kicked back against his shoulder. The sharp bark of the explosion echoed up and down the cañon walls. The streamer of blue smoke veiled the rider for a moment. When it floated dreamily off, Pancho saw the black horse rear high, spring out of the cañon opening. The rider's arms went up and his head snapped back. Sprawling grotesquely, Thumb Cochrane fell to the ground.

The Winchester dropped from Pancho's hands, clattered unheeded to the rocks below. Pancho's knees grew weak under him. His hands contracted, his head throbbed and whirled. He'd killed a man!

He shrieked! As if in mortal agony. Energy came back in a flood and he sprang to his feet. He ran, stumbling, toward his horse. The animal shrilled as his master slammed into the kak and shoved in the hooks mercilessly. The big dun struck a bee-line for town at a hot lope. And his master, blinded by a myriad of staring Jacks of Spades, did not see the one witness to the shooting. He didn't even suspect

that old Jose Olivares, sitting a lanky gray mule, had followed him and had seen the whole gulching party. He didn't know anything about it until Jose jogged in to town to tell that he had buried the dead man.

THE next few days were a nightmare to Pancho Jordan. Day and night he was haunted. Haunted by the one-eyed Jack of Spades and the gray eyed rustler, Cochrane, and the blue eyed Frank Jordan. The Jack of spades was leering. The gray eyed ghost looked hurt and startled. But the blue eyed corpse had no expression on its clayey face. It was dead. Dead as hell, and showed no joy at its vengeance.

Pancho rode the range pursued by the three ghosts. At night and through the sun-scorched day he jogged his big dun horse over hills and across meadows to escape from his tormentors. But always the horse stopped and nibbled the short grass at the mouth of a little cañon while his master sat the kak listlessly, staring at a mound of yellow earth where a gray eyed ghost had oozed out to torture him.

Limpy Owen had been the first to congratulate Pancho. The wizened little rancher eased up to the new killer at the bar in the Ola Cattleman's Club. The tenseness on Limpy's seamed face had faded. Everything was fine. Their story had gone over and Jose, his palm well gilded by the three ranchers, was stolidly cooperating.

IT was still less than a week after the killing by the cañon. Young Pancho Jordan was sitting alone in the big Lazy-J ranch house entertaining his three ghosts. He was mumbling like a crazy man when Jose Olivares, riding his lanky gray mule, pounded up in front of the big house.

"Señor Jordan," he called, even before drawing to a halt. "Señor Jordan, where are you?"

Pancho shook himself together, looked up in the yellow light just as the old Mexican ambled through the door.

"What is it?" he asked, stuttering in his constricted throat. "Jose?"

"Señor Pancho," Jose was leaning over him, tugging at his shoulder. "Come with me. Señor Wetherell sent Jose for you. He want to see you. Right now. He say it ver' important. He tell me bring you."

"What for?" Pancho muttered, lumbering to his feet like a world-weary old man. "What's he want of me, Jose?"

The old Mexican caught at his elbow, pulled him insistingly toward the door. "He no say. He want you, ver' quick."

They were outside now. Pancho stood by the corral watching the little nester rope and saddle the big dun. He had no feeling at all.

Jose climbed onto the back of the mule. In one hand he carried a lantern which he held up for Pancho to see by. He waited until the youngster had mounted the dun. Then he tickled the gray mule's flanks with his heels and rode into the night.

Jose, the lantern bobbing weirdly, the mule bouncing awkwardly, led the way across the prairie to the south and west. Pancho, dumbly following, neither knew nor cared that they weren't heading toward Wetherell's spread.

THE jogging light up ahead bounced down and stood still. To the dull eyes of young Pancho the light blurred into two lamps. He tried to concentrate, to pull them together. It couldn't be done. There were two lamps there, making pale, long shadows of the black night.

Pancho looked dazedly around. His distraught muscles jerked when his eyes focused, as though inevitably, on that patch of fresh yellow earth. A grave. . . . As he half fell, half climbed out of the kak he heard Limpy's squeaky voice from the other side of the lanterns.

"Well," the shrimp barked. "What in hell did you get us out to this devil's corral for? Tryin' to be picturesque?" The voice subsided like the end of a coyote's yapping.

Pancho blinked, stared through the yellow rays to the black beyond. His face cracked into a smile, almost a laugh, when he saw Limpy standing there like an old toad gaping for water. Behind him, his hand pushing back his John B., was the ever present shadow, Spence Wetherell.

Then the kid's grin vanished. Wetherell's sombre eyes reminded him that Limpy had asked a question.

"Me? Why did *I?*" the kid stammered.

"Yes, you," Limpy yapped. "You get us out here just to watch this damn' grave? You and yore Spic gravedigger?"

"Spic gravedigger!" Pancho repeated absurdly, jerkily glancing around through the yellow spiked gloom. "Jose said—" His voice trailed off. He looked around, amazed. "Where is he? Gone!"

Limpy jerked feverishly. Spence shuffled about beside him. Both men were playing with black hilted forty-fives. Plucking at the butts.

"Pulling a sandy," Limpy shrieked, clutching his oiled walnut grip until his wrinkled buckles hardened into smooth white. "Yore Spic gravedigger—"

Then a cow mooed eerily up the black maw of the cañon. Another cow answered her. And then there was silence again. The three men relaxed. Limpy chuckled foolishly.

"Sorry," he said. "Guess my nerves are shot. Didn't mean to act that way. The Spic an' the grave got me. Guess the Spic wants more dinero. Said you wanted us, Pancho. Said . . ." His voice slid into a trance-like silence. His jaw sagged and he stared fixedly over Pancho's shoulder. . . .

Pancho swung on his heel, his clawing fist darting for gun butt. In midswing he stopped, stumbled back a step, jerked his hands up as if guarding his face from flailing fists. Behind him he heard the painful deep sigh of breathing, breath being sucked into constricted lungs. He felt his own heart beating wildly under the frail protection of his ribs.

One dead ghost had come to life! Thumb Cochrane was materializing out of the purple gloom. A low held forty-five glinted in the light of the lamps. A white bandage, covering one side of his face, gleamed dully in the yellow rays.

SLOWLY, deliberately, almost painfully, Thumb Cochrane marched through the rim of lamplight into its full glare. His gun muzzle swung upward in a small arc. The three men, standing stunned before him, acted automatically to that dumb command. Then Thumb, contempt sweeping across his pain-racked face, tossed his forty-five down beside the nearest lamp. As if Cochrane, the quick artist, was still invincible stripped of all his arms.

"I just didn't want to get shot before I had a chance to say something," Thumb broke the silence. "Don't need that hog-leg now. Can talk better without it anyway. An' will go peaceful with you when I'm through."

The three stiff men were melting. The ghost had a voice!

"I thought . . ." Limpy mumbled tentatively.

"Yes," Cochrane answered. "You thought. But Baby-face ain't such a hot shot as *he* thought. Baby-face merely creased my skull an' smacked me out for a couple of days. Yuh thought, but yo're wrong."

Pancho tried to talk. The blabbing sound he let out carried no words. His tongue acted like a slab of longhorn steak in his mouth. Spence Wetherell just stood there mountainously, playing with his hands, twirling his thumbs stupidly, fidgeting.

Limpy, the crackling banty rooster, was scratching for words and found a few foolish ones. Limpy could always talk.

"We're going to hang you," he chirped. "We'll hang you."

Cochrane laughed hoarsely. "For killing Frank, I suppose."

"An' stealing our cows. We'll hang you anyway," Limpy croaked.

Cochrane lurched over toward Owen. He was standing half crouched over the brightest of the lamps. The rays threw his face into strong, weird shadows.

"But I'm talkin' first. Hangin' later." His gray eyes glittered. "I'm tellin' a few things." Thumb waved his hand toward Spence. "Yuh listen too, yuh big fat fool. I need a witness, an' Baby-face can't let off his snivelin' long enough to know what's goin' on."

Spence bridled. Limpy cursed.

"Like hell! We'll hang you."

"Shut up!" Spence snapped. In controlled voice he said to Cochrane: "We're listening." Limpy's big mouth clamped down.

"All right." Thumb began talking rapidly.

"When I took to thinkin' about my spread, it occurred to me that maybe coyotes didn't steal my chickens an' chase

my cows. Maybe a man done it, an' I suspected coyotes, me bein' big-hearted like that—once. Maybe the man who done it would be the one who knew I was hard up, the hombre I owed money to, the gent who wanted my water hole—"

"Yo're a liar!" Limpy cracked.

"I ain't said nothin' yet," Cochrane reminded him hotly. "So I took to lookin' around an' found me plenty proof. Even found the traps used to catch coyotes to let loose in my coop. Now I'm willin' to buy that place back with the money I got from sellin' his cows. I ain't never took no other cattle but that gent's. An' I'll call it quits." Then he added: "Ain't that fair, Spence?"

Wetherell had not quite got the drift yet. But Limpy had.

"Yo're lyin', Cochrane," he fumed. "I'd plug you where you stand for that, if I hadn't rather see you hanging. You don't expect—"

"No, I don't." Cochrane edged over to one side of the lamp. His body tight with the killing power of the whole affair. His hands strayed to his empty holster. "No one would believe a rustler, would they, Owen? But how about a murderer? How about a feller that steals stock an' blames it on another? How about a feller who shoots the first man findin' him blottin' brands, then gets a kid to gulch someone else for it?" Cochrane's voice sank to a low whisper. "How about it, Owen? Will the boys believe a murderer?"

"You tryin' to prove that I—"

"I ain't provin' nothin'." Cochrane pretended to ignore Limpy's hand edging toward his old cutter. He straightened up, peered off into the black cañon and called through the shadows: "Jose! Come here. I want you to tell the boys who yuh saw plug Frank Jordan. Drive them blotted cows out here on the way. . . ."

His voice died in a gasp, overwhelmed by the roar of gunpowder and the smash of lead. He ducked. Kicked at the lantern. Too late. Limpy Owen's forty-five had come up in a flash of blue steel. It cracked once. And almost with it came the bark of a rifle from the cañon. Pancho suddenly awoke with a hog-leg in his hand. Automatically he clicked back the hammer. But before the kid could put the gun into action Limpy's iron spat again, kicked up a yellow puff at Cochrane's feet. Joe's rifle barked once more. Limpy jerked. And the pounding reverberations of echoed shots blended into the soft slap of flesh on earth as Limpy and Cochrane collapsed together.

* * * *

Limpy never moved again under his own power. But Cochrane finally came to, and through heavy eyes looked up at the three men grouped about him. The old Mexican was carefully tying up a hole in Thumb's side where Limpy's first slug had burned his ribs, and as he worked he muttered away in his liquid native tongue. A little bunch of cows that Thumb and Jose had found a few days before were gaping at the lamplight. On their sides were fresh, raw brands. Linked Circles made over from Lazy-J.

The big fat fellow was jawing the youngster and for a moment neither of them knew Cochrane was regaining consciousness.

"Never thought it of Limpy," Spence was saying to the kid. "But Cochrane's right, sure enough. I see now how come Thumb knew Limpy was takin' the cows. But what I don't savvy is how he knew Limpy shot yore dad."

"Look," Pancho cried, his voice alive for the first time in days. "He's comin' to!"

Jose fastened a button to hold the jacket over the bandage he had finished. He shook his gray old head slowly and solemnly.

"Señor Cochrane all right. He was at my house havin' chuck wit' me an' the old woman the day Señor Jordan get shot. He get so full o' old woman's cookin' he sleep it off all afternoon when I plow. Señor Cochrane know he don't do nothin'. We fin' stole cows an' make guess." He shrugged expressively.

Thumb made a very poor smile out of a gallant effort. He wanted to have his word. "Didn't know it was Limpy. Thought I could bluff him into a throw-down if I didn't have a cutter on me. Worked, didn't it?"

GUNSMOKE GAL OF NIGHTHAWK RANGE

By John Starr

Law lead blocked the boogery Texan's back-trail . . . ahead, his way was barred by the cold-eyed, two-gun queen of that death-scarred Nighthawk range.

IT was a scant half-hour before sundown when the quartet of horsemen, riding down the dim trail through the scrub leading to Seep Spring, rounded a hill shoulder to encounter a party of five riders heading straight toward them. The jerky, swift-moving surprise of both groups was equally mutual.

Rowdy Davis, reining in suddenly as any of his three companions, saw at one glance that every member of the other quintet was heeled to the spurs—not only with six-shooters, but with rifles in boots under their knees. A hard-bitten group of men whose appearance gave the impression of meaning grim business.

And they did. Without so much as a word, save the hoarse order of one who wore a nickel star on his vest, they singly and collectively went after pistols and Winchesters the instant the strange quartet appeared around the bend.

And the next instant the still air of the Madrone country was crashing and echoing to the spit of gunfire, and Rowdy, hunched low over his saddlehorn, was thumbing his hammer with the rest.

He didn't know what it was all about, but he did know that his buckskin was rearing and that he'd felt the hot snap of a bullet fan his neck. These hombres had showered down without warning, and were shooting to kill. And Rowdy popped his caps likewise.

As in a whirligig nightmare he saw saddles emptied, horses plunging and bucking; he heard shouts and curses. He saw the seamed man with the star on his vest and black slouch hat tumble from his kak—he saw Booger Red, the leader of his own bunch, and Twister hit the ground. He felt a tug at his hat, and knew that he'd missed being fitted with wings by a matter of gnat's eyebrows. He fired at a weaving figure before him in the dust—saw the target tumble with outflung arms, in the strange, eloquent gesture of one saluting the final mystery.

Then Rowdy turned and broke for the scrub up-trail, zigzagging and crouched low over the buckskin's neck to make as difficult a target as possible. He did not know that a bullet had pierced the fleshy part of his thigh; as in the case of many similar instances, he felt no pain.

He flung a look over his shoulder, then slowed up, turned. Only two men stayed aback their mounts—and one was old Badger. Badger, the grizzled mustanger who'd seemed to take a little to Rowdy during their trip that day, and had mostly jogged along stirrup to stirrup with him. Old Badger, who was clinging to his saddlehorn with both hands, his graying head bent. And a darkening stain spreading over the front of his faded shirt.

Spurring up beside Badger, Rowdy caught the bridle rein of his wild-eyed pony, and the oldster raised his eyes and slowly looked at him as Rowdy said: "Hold on, old timer. We're ridin' away from here."

For, limned against the skyline behind the arroyo, another band of horsemen seemed to perch a moment, then slip over the edge. Two—three—four. . . . Rowdy stopped counting as his head jerked away, and he touched steel to the buckskin, keeping tight grasp upon the rein of old Badger's claybank.

Riding hard, they tore back through the brush, leaving the dim trail, making for

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Through dimming eyes, he saw that the bushwacker was—a woman!

the welter of hollows and swales that cut and gashed the neighborhood of Seep Spring. While with every pound of hoofs and lurch of leather the gaunt, grizzled oldster beside Rowdy, clinging for dear life to the pommel, groaned and cursed and swayed more groggily.

"'Tain't no use, kid," he said thickly. "*Vamanos.* I'm buckin' out."

"Hang an rattle—we're nigh tuh the water hole. We'll—"

BADGER'S head dropped lower, but he managed to keep in leather until the winded horses crashed down the slope to the greenish trickle in that ravine in the wooded hills that went under the name of Seep Spring. As the lathered animals skidded to a stop and thrust their flared nostrils into the water, old Badger Hoke tumbled to the ground.

As Rowdy bent over him, the old man whispered, "They got Red an' Twister—an' me, kid. An'—an' you're smutted with the devil's tar brush. Light a shuck afore they git you, too. You just happened tuh be ridin' in bad company today."

Rowdy, sloshing water into the dying man's mouth from the brim of his hat,

narrowed his eyes. "Them other jaspers the law?"

"'Low as how they was," gasped Badger. "An'—yo're branded, son—shore as God made green apples! Lissen—yank these boots off!"

And as Rowdy complied, Badger grinned faintly. "My dam' corns is hurtin' me. Kid, they's five hunderd dollar bills in each boot. They—come from the Cabazon Bank—couple days ago. . . . Take 'em, an' have a drink some time on ole Badger. . . ."

Blood boiled from his bearded lips, and Rowdy raised his head. "They—they's somethin' in the horn of Red's saddle, kid—the one with the eagle beak taps. . . ." Badger's voice gurgled, but he went on, desperately—"look in that there pommel—Nighthawk Basin—down the Piños Altos trail. . . ."

He strangled, choked: "Allus wanted—to—buckout—with my boots off—kid. . . . *Vamanos*—git goin'—'fore they ketch yuh—"

A chill shook the old *oreaña,* his eyelids fluttered. But for an instant his sharp gaze, though dimming, fixed straight on Rowdy: "Nighthawk — Kit Tanner —" Badger's voice faded. . . .

"I didn't git much uh that, pard," Rowdy said anxiously. But Badger Hoke made no attempt to repeat. His head rolled to one side, and his body went limp in Rowdy's arm. After a moment, the young fellow laid him down gently, then placed the scuffed boots by his feet. He didn't touch the money stowed in them.

In thoughtful silence Rowdy rein-anchored the claybank near Badger's body, then forked his own buckskin in the gathering dusk. For the first time he became conscious of the numbness in his thigh. He slid a hand down under the chaps, and it came away sticky and crimson. He was startled by the discovery that he was wounded, and swore softly.

"Maybe I ain't playin' in such luck as I figgered," he told himself, busy examining the wound. "After cheatin' them hombres outa my pelt thataway, it'd shore grieve me tuh bleed to death. Well, she didn't smash the bone, anyhow—"

The distant sound of hoofbeats over the ridge sent him into swift action. Sending the buckskin up the swale a hundred yards, he tied the pony to a root in such a manner that it wouldn't likely raise its head and nicker. Leaving it hidden in dense scrub, and confident the newcomers wouldn't suspect his presence, he crept silently back to the waterhole, and concealed himself a dozen yards from Badger's body, in a crooked gully.

HE saw them ride warily up in the thickening dusk, two men on horseback, with drawn guns. Saw them dismount, and bend above old Hoke, their heads close together. They seemed to be discussing something, but Rowdy couldn't distinguish words for a moment, only sounds, until one voice came low pitched and sharp:

"—Nothing at all on him, dammit! Mebbeso in his saddle. . . ."

One, swearing, got up and approached the claybank, jerking off the thin tarp roll behind the cantle, and rifling the leather pockets. The other was pawing through the roll, muttering. Rowdy couldn't get a good look at them in the dusk, but he did see that one, who seemed to be the boss, was a broad-shouldered, very erect fellow with a wide-brimmed gray hat, who looked and acted cool as a cucumber. And—he heard the other one call him Mort.

"Damn the luck!" The shorter fellow quit the tarp roll. "It ain't here, Morg. Reckon that other busky what got away has got it? Don't seem reasonable though—him leavin' a thousand bucks here in ole Hoke's boots, thisaway. They's somethin' danged funny—"

"No use figgerin' about it," Mort replied harshly. "We'll git back to the others, then camp down here at the springs till day. No use tryin' to pick up that vamoosed hombre's trail till it's light. We'll put Chone on it, then—he c'n track a roadrunner over caprock. With the sheriff and mayor both slugged out back yonder in the ruckus, we oughta be able to move right pretty, now. . . ."

The other laughed, and they moved off, riding back the way they'd come. Rowdy moved, too, anxious to get a good look at the pair, but the darkness frustrated him, availing his effort little. Save that the one called Mort was lean and broad-shouldered, and his companion leaner and shorter, he knew nothing worth while.

So he crawled down to the spring presently, washed and bound up his fleshy wound, limped back to his staked pony, and mounted. His belly was empty, but his canteens were full and he had over half a sack of Bull Durham and lots of matches. As he put the varas behind him from the waterhole, and took another notch for his belt for supper, Jeff Davis, better known as Rowdy, whistled softly as he blew smoke through his teeth.

Lots of angles about that late affair didn't make sense, he figured. That Booger Red, Twister and old Badger were longriders he didn't doubt, and likely they'd been the ones who robbed the Cabazon bank two, three days ago up country. Badger had practically admitted as much, before he cashed out. And Rowdy, a rambling range nomad in a strange land and far from his native stamping grounds, had chancily joined their cavalcade that day after a mutual stop at a small trading post over toward the Pedernales. They just happened to be jogging the same direction, that was all.

The youth grinned wryly, crookedly. Just a happenstance—but it had put his tail in a crack. The Law would be after him quirt and spur, now. . . . A sheriff and a mayor downed in gunfight, among others. And old Badger's dying talk about something in Booger Red's saddle, and queerer somethings about somebody named Kit Tanner, and Nighthawk Basin, and Piños Altos trail. . . .

Rowdy shook his head. It didn't make sense, that wandering jargon of the old hairpin. Likely his dyin' mind was playin' with old ghosts, and it all didn't amount to a hill uh beans. Still—

"He didn't talk cracked," Rowdy muttered. "An' he seemed tuh kinda like me, somehow. Reckon as how I'll just sorta head for this here Nighthawk range around Piños Altos, wherever she is. . . ."

II

IT was late the following afternoon when Rowdy reined in his tired buckskin on the top of a scrub-crested ridge, drew down the curled brim of his *brasada* brush-popper hat to shade his eyes, and stared out across the hill-rimmed basin that sloped away from the hogback. Slouching in the saddle, he slowly twisted a cigarette, scanning the lay of the land with puckered eyes, getting his bearings. His was a photographic retina for detail and that one scrutiny would print Nighthawk Basin upon his mind indelibly.

Most of the night, and pretty near all day, he'd kept moving, and his face and eyes showed the lack of rest and sleep. Only one stop of consequence had he made, and that at a Mexican *tienda* back at a cross-trail, where he procured food for himself and pony from a wrinkled-faced, sly-eyed cholo patrón.

There he'd found out the way to Nighthawk Basin, but the *mozo* professed ignorance when Rowdy mentioned the name of Kit Tanner. The fact that there *was* such a place as Nighthawk Basin upped the odds in Rowdy's estimation of old Badger's talk. That so, likely there was such an hombre as Tanner there, too. That spig's manner had been evasive when Rowdy mentioned the name.

He learned, too, via the bush telegraph that travels along the whispering leaves in all the Southwest country, of the big gunfight over Madrones way, in which a sheriff named Ratchel and a mayor of a town called Gustine had been slain, among others, with a bunch of paisanos, of whom two were killed and one captured, badly hurt. A fourth member of the band escaped, it was said. The same band that robbed the bank at Cabazon, shortly before the gun battle.

"It is a wild malpais, those Jicarillas, señor," the *patron* had told Rowdy, meaningly, referring to the Nighthawk country. "Not good to visit, onless—"

His unspoken word, his significant shrug, had been fraughter with information than any sound of mouth to Rowdy. As he rode on he wasn't under any illusions concerning his destination, not at all. But he did come to life like an unleashed spring, and send his buckskin leaping like a rabbit for the protection of a shallow dip below the slope when, as he started down, a spurt of dust mushed into the air some twenty yards ahead and to his left.

A second after the slug struck, Rowdy heard the flat spang of the rifle, which showed him the firer was a considerable distance off.

Safe in the twisty depression, dismounted and pistol in hand, he searched the slopes for the hidden sniper, his grayish-blue eyes squinted and alight. "I got a hunch, Chick," he told his pony, "that me'n you are gonna find this here country plumb interestin'—"

Again the distant crack cut off his speech, and a bullet kicked up dirt on the edge of Rowdy's hole-in. The sniper, he decided, was concealed in a clump of lodgepole three, four hundred yards beyond, along the lip of a right-angling slope. Far, far beyond the range of any six-shooter, and Rowdy packed no rifle.

"Helluva way to greet a pilgrim," he grimaced. And as the hidden rifle cracked again, then another time, and each whining bullet struck approximately in the same spot on the crater's edge, Rowdy nodded slowly. "He ain't tryin' to drill us, Chick," he said evenly. "Nope. If he was just a middlin' shot, them slugs 'ud be hittin' an' whinin' around every which way. He's just writin' a billy-doo to us, *compadre*—an' it ain't hard tuh read. 'My compliments,' it says, 'an git tuh hell outa here!'"

So saying, Rowdy holstered his gun, forked leather stiffly and kneed the buckskin out of their covert. Waving a hand toward the laired marksman, he started down the opposite crest from the sharpshooter's hiding place. The youngster had no hankering to argue with a six-shooter at such range; he was taking the hint and going away. The move seemed to satisfy the sniper, for no more bullets came speeding from the clump of pines.

"Looks like we got tuh make a trail, boy," Rowdy said to his cayuse. "That there lead lingo is plumb persuadin'. Somebody shore ain't particularly anxious to have company over on that ridge. I wonder why, Chick? Yeah, I shore wonder."

And so wondering, Rowdy suddenly angled the buckskin off into a brushy draw that wound toward the upper end of the hogback like a trench. It was deep enough for shelter, its lips thickly matted with chaparral and cactus and whitebrush. Rowdy, squinting at the westering sun, decided that he *might* have time to do what he had in mind—if Lady Luck would give him a little break.

Anyhow, he had to have rest and water soon—there was no water along his back trail. And—the Nighthawk seemed to have plenty.

Presently he tied the buckskin in a madrona clump, glanced all about, then faded away afoot through the scrub. The rim of the sun was just touching the crest of the right-angle hogback, to his left.

ROWDY DAVIS was moving on padded feet, albeit with a limp, through the thick maze of jackpines, the thorny growth of catclaw and manzaneet and creosote bush, matting the slope of the gulch-gashed ridge. Creeping like an animal with drawn gun, peering left and right into the deepening shadows for the first movement of an enemy. The sunlight filtered but feebly into the *monte;* thorn tore at his flesh and clothing. The air was hushed, still, with not even a bird call to break the silence. Rowdy, slinking with the silence of a stalking Apache, felt the hairs on his neck hackle queerly.

He didn't like this set-up, not a little bit. There was an air of suspended animation about the slope, as though every living thing had fled. Some strange presentiment of menace made the sweat on him clammy; he felt like a cold, bony hand was poised above his shoulder, ready to descend. Stock-still in his tracks, he heard, off to his right, the sharp crack of a dry limb, a faint rustle of leaves.

A muscle twitched in Rowdy's cheek, his fog-colored eyes turning an odd, greenish shade as they raked the slope from whence that faint rustle had come. He caught the slight movement of a greasewood bush—his cocked six-shooter jerked steady. Then his thin lips twisted as the lisping *twee-twee-zee* notes of a cedar waxwing came from the dusty-hued foliage.

"Hell," he muttered. "I'm gittin' the jitters—"

He raised erect, peering over the clump of catclaw. The sharp crack of a rifle smashed the sunset silence, and went rolling across hill and swale in diminishing echo of claps. But Rowdy didn't hear it. For he'd once more seen that movement in the greasewood clump—seen it too late. He'd only time to duck his head in the desperate start of a crash dive to cover when daylight split into a million

gleaming bits of color, and the world went black for him.

He crashed down heavily, sprawled there still.

The greasewood bush parted, and a figure in deer-skin pants and moccasins stepped out, a rifle thrust menacingly forward. A soft gray hat was on the sniper's head, and a tan handkerchief tied over the face as a mask from the eyes down. But there was no mistaking the lithe figure—it was that of a woman. Khaki shirted, firm treaded, the busher moved to Rowdy on noiseless feet, and for a moment stood looking down at him, the last light of sunset etching her rosily, making her seem mysteriously unreal. Under the shadow of the sombrero, the soft riot of her hair looked golden; her features were white and tense and masklike beneath the veiling neckerchief, and her violet eyes shone almost black. She breathed deeply.

Stooping, she quickly examined the fallen man, noting the ugly crease along his head where her bullet had furrowed, and the dark red rills of blood on his face. Her lips parted over a quickened breath, and color deepened them to the tint of old wine, as a finger felt Rowdy's pulse and found it beating irregularly but strongly. Face flushed and eyes sharp, her gaze swept the hillside, focused upon an arroyo not far away where Rowdy had staked out his buckskin. Fifteen minutes later she had retrieved the horse.

And twenty minutes later Rowdy was a-saddle, head and arms dangling limply, following a dim trail down the hillside in the swift fading light of day. Guiding the horse was a slender, light-footed figure in deerskin pants and tan shirt, wearing soft moccasins and carrying a rifle snugged under one arm.

The mask, dropped now to hang loosely about her bare throat, disclosed the features of a girl almost unbelievable in her wild, golden beauty. But Rowdy Davis didn't see it. Held on the buckskin by a tie rope, his world was peopled by shadows, and blackness—and pain.

III

IT was pitch dark before Rowdy regained consciousness. His head ached like it would split, his belly felt yeasty, his mouth was dry and parched. Things were pretty much blurred in his brain at first, but as he lay with eyes tightly closed, late happenings condensed in his mind. He recalled the laired sniper, his own stalking, something hitting his head—

Rowdy opened his lids a slit, like a possuming animal, to get the layout of things. He was in a rocky chamber of ridged walls and serrated roof, with a big stone fireplace at one end, the light of its low blaze sending shadows dancing on ceiling and one wall. To one side was a bunk, neatly made. A number of deer and puma and bobcat skins were strewn about the floor; there was a crude homemade table, and chairs; several pairs of stag antlers on the wall. From somewhere behind the rocky room came the sounds of movement, and the champing of animals at feed.

Rowdy raised on an elbow, lifted fingers to his throbbing head. A neat bandage turbaned it, damp with the scent of whisky and arnica. He drank deeply and thirstily from a pail of water near at hand, then, with a grunt, was starting to have a look at his grooved thigh when a soft footstep behind caused him to look up sharply.

A girl stood there regarding him levelly. The fireglow shone red on her hair, silhouetted her lithe figure in clear etching. Rowdy stared, forgetting the thump in his head and ache of his body.

"Sleep well?" came her ironical voice. But a rich voice, with a little musical lift running through it. Rowdy blinked his eyes twice, then grinned at her. His mouth twisted whimsically.

"First hand is yores, ma'am, I reckon." Then he asked, his fingers fumbling for the makings, "Mind enlightenin' me as tuh just what happened? I'm sorta hazy about details."

Her level gaze rested upon him a long moment before she answered. Then: "I was trying to kill you. You dodged—just in time."

Rowdy lit his cigarette, rubbed his unshaven jaw. "Kinda tough country on strangers. You in the habit of goin' around takin' pot shots at folks yuh don't know?"

Her gaze sharpened; Rowdy felt that those dark violet eyes were stabbing through him like knives, probing, digging.

"You intended to take me down to Slager, didn't you?" she asked in a cold tone. "What else would you expect?"

Rowdy squinted at her through tobacco smoke. "Slager?" he queried. "I dunno the gent. Likewise I dunno as I savvy a whole heap of this here deal. Why should I take you down to this Señor Slager?"

She laughed, a light and musical lilt of derision. "That's what they all say, scalp hunter! When they set out to earn a thousand dollars, sometimes it isn't so easy as it seems."

Rowdy blinked again, studying the tip of his quirly. And the golden girl studied him in the short silence—the lithe lines of his body, the set of his fighting chin. His was a face which could not understand defeat, a scrapper's face with unreadable gaze and thin mouth, queerly attractive because of its reckless, hard strength. And her own features became touched with a new sharpness as she continued to study him.

"It's sort of a joke," she said at length, "to hear one of Slager's men ask why he should take me in to his boss. We may as well end this foolishness. It's no sport, to me."

"It's no game with me either, ma'am," said Rowdy with quiet seriousness. His glance met, challenged hers. "As I said, I dunno what this point is, about Slager and a thousand pesos, that you're drivin' at. I'm meanin' it, lady."

She was watching him steadily, intently, with almost a look of expectancy on her face. "You mean to deny," she asked slowly, "that you weren't up here looking for me? That you weren't on my trail, riding in Slager's pay? Why else could you be snooping around the Nighthawk?"

"Ma'am," said Rowdy quietly, "I've never even heard of this Slager gent before. I'm a stranger hereabouts, a wanderin' brush-popper a long ways from home—an' gittin' further. I was sorta moseyin' over tow'd Colorado way, an' figgered cuttin' through these Jicarillas would be about as short an' easy way uh reachin' it as any. I was plumb surprised when them lead billy-dooz came singin' outa the scrub this evenin', headin' me away from forage an' water. An' to find it was a girl behind that there rifle—"

ROWDY grinned full at her. "I'm tellin' yuh the straight of it, ma'am. I didn't come to these here hills lookin' for anybody—that is, leastwise no girl."

"Then you *were* looking for somebody? Who?" Her voice was sharp.

"Mebbe, mebbe not. I hadn't plumb made up my mind."

"Indeed! Maybe, mister man, you'd better talk a little freer, considering the jackpot you are in. I might know your name, in addition to other things."

"I dunno who you are either. Or nothin' about yuh, 'cept that you're danged quick uh trigger on innercent pilgrims hereabouts."

Her face was flushed, her eyes dark. "I warned you plenty to go back," she said curtly. "And I watched you slip into that arroyo, stake your pony, and start stalking me. Nobody but one of Slager's men would do that. Too bad my bullet wasn't a bit lower."

Rowdy grinned cheerfully. Fire and insides, this gal—she wasn't no weepin' willow or clingin' vine, by grabs. Anger, not fear. Standing in the limning fire-glow, she looked like some lithe-waisted, high-breasted creature of the wild, savage and untamed, frozen there in a hunter's poise. There was some sleazy, silken quality which clung to her body, a hint of jungle fierceness. The heavy gunbelt, with the holstered six snugged in the low holster against her shapely thigh, seemed out of place—yet queerly in place, too. . . .

For a fraught, tense moment their gazes locked. The girl, her red-gold hair a flaming riot, her face set and hard and flushedly beautiful, her little white teeth just showing behind scarlet lips that were moist, drawn back a trifle. And Rowdy, with his short unruly hair between a rust and blond in color, and its cowlick now concealed beneath the confining bandage. With his snub nose and fighting jaw and fog-colored eyes that could show greenish glints, like a cat's in the dark. Young, not over twenty-three or four—but with eyes holding the grim experiences of older men.

And his queer way of blowing smoke through his teeth, when he whistled softly—

A moment when tiger looked at tiger. When wolf looked at wolf. Then the girl drew a sharp breath, and her fingers re-

laxed. "Very well," she said shortly. "You stay here tonight, and tomorrow you ride on—to Colorado. But by another route, my friend. No trail from Nighthawk Basin crosses the Line—*north*. Do I make myself clear?"

"Plumb so," nodded Rowdy. He tossed his quirly stub toward the fireplace, glanced questioningly around. "My cayuse—"

"Is put up and grained," said the girl. "Your tarp's against the wall. The least I could do, after knocking you out, was to take care of the animal and sort of patch you up. I'm not *quite* a Mescalero yet—even if Slager does brand me one!"

"I'm obliged, lady—plenty. An'—I wish you'd see yore way clear to tell me somethin' about this Slager gent. He sounds sorta—er—interestin'."

But she didn't answer. With a last glance toward him—and it lingered a moment upon his rent overalls and bandaged thigh—she turned away and walked to the fireplace, busying herself with some pots and pans. Rowdy squinted a look toward his bare flanks, minus belt and gun which were nowhere in sight. Then he got stiffly to his feet, and lounged toward the open glow of the fireplace, where the aroma of boiling coffee and appetizing smell of frying spuds filled the air of the cave. Hunkering on an upturned box, he said:

"Smells plumb good to me. I'm hungry enough to eat mutton, nearly."

The girl turned the smoking potatoes, her face rosy from the heat. "You wouldn't be from Texas, would you?" she asked suddenly.

Rowdy jerked a look at her. "Texas? How—what makes yuh think that, lady? Just guessin'?"

"No reason. You just sounded like Texas to me," coolly. And added: "Several of Slager's gunslingers hail from there, you know."

"That right? I didn't know. But all sorts uh folks drift out of the Lone Star. Me—I'm from way down in the *brasada* country—a short nuff brush-popper from lower Neuces. A climate that I'm beginnin' to figger fits my breeches, after all."

She glanced again at Rowdy, obliquely. "Been carrying that souvenir in your leg all the way up?" Her words were malicious.

"Nope," he grinned. "Plumb recent. You don't miss much uh anything, do yuh? You—an' other folks here in *Nueva Mex*—neither with eyes not bullets. Shoot first, then look tuh see what yuh kilt."

"You haven't maybe, by any chance," she asked sarcastically, "been poaching on Mort Slager's preserves, have you, Texas?"

ROWDY started, stared at her. *Mort* Slager! What the hell! That was the name of . . . Rowdy had decided to keep to himself all connection with that shooting affray of yesterday in the Madrones country, and of the dying Badger's mention of the Nighthawk to him. He'd decided to play innocent with this girl, until he knew a whole lot more of the picture, and rather more of just where he stood in its makeup. But his start of surprise at the name she'd called had been very noticeable, and the girl was looking at him sharply.

"Is—is that your friend Slager's name—Mort?" he asked slowly.

"Slager's name is Mort," she replied quietly, too quietly. "As I imagine you very well know. The cat's out of the bag, mister."

"Mort"—Rowdy nodded, speaking as if to himself. "That was the name of the big fella down at the waterhole—who was pawin' over old Badger for somethin'—somethin' he couldn't find. . . ."

"What did you say?" The girl stood over him, hand quivering near the butt of her six-shooter, her eyes aflame. "Slager—a waterhole—searching Badger for something—*Badger who?*"

"I dunno," Rowdy replied flatly. "Just Badger. Like Booger Red, an' Twister. All dead now, lady. Long with a sheriff named Ratchel, an' a possyin' mayor of somethin' or other. A big fella I heard called Mort was lookin' over old Badger for somethin'—him an' another hombre. They found five one hunderd *peso* bills in both of Badger's boots, after I'd pulled 'em off for him by request before he died, but they didn't find what they was lookin' for. I know, 'cause I was watchin'. . . ."

The girl's face was close to Rowdy's, whose eyes were fixed on the fire. Her breath came fast, uneven, through parted lips.

"How—how do you know all this?" she whispered. *"Tell me!"*

"I was ridin' with Badger, an' Twister, an' Red, yesterday evenin'," Rowdy said bleakly, "when that bunch jumped us. I drug Badger far as the spring, where he passed out. He was tryin' tuh tell me somethin' when he cashed his chips. I got some of it, but it didn't make sense . . . somethin' about Piños Altos, an' Nighthawk—"

"Yes!" The girl's whisper was tense, her breath hot against Rowdys face. His eyes met hers, he nodded. "About Nighthawk," he finished. "And a feller named Kit Tanner, there. . . . I come along—"

The girl caught her breath sharply, straightened, stared down at Rowdy Davis with brilliant, slightly narrowed eyes.

"*I* am Kit Tanner, Texas," she said quietly.

IV

TOBACCO spilled from Rowdy's brown paper onto his lap, and for a moment he sat looking at the girl from sombre eyes, astonishment etched on his bronzed features. "You're Kit Tanner?" he echoed. "Hell—I thought he was a man! The way ole Badger talked. . . ."

"I'm Kit Tanner," the girl repeated steadily. And Badger Hoke was my great uncle. What message did he leave —for me?"

But Rowdy became canny. He had only this wild girl's word that she was Tanner, and she was a cougar cat if ever there was one prowled. Maybe she was Kit, maybe not. And, even if she was, Rowdy didn't savvy what old Badger had tried to tell him. He'd just forget that part of it; for a while.

"No message," he said. "Just Nighthawk, an' Piños Altos, an' the name. I figgered mebbe, that Badger wanted this Tanner party to know that he was kilt. Bein' as we was sorta amigos, I rode over here to deliver the tidin's. That's about all of it, ma'am."

"Your story, and you're going to stick to it, huh?" The girl's voice was mocking. "How come you were riding with a bunch of outlaws, and wanted men? You belonged, eh?"

Rowdy shook his head. "Just happenstance. Met up with 'em over at a Pedernal tradin' post just before dinner time yesterday. We all et there, an' later rode off together—we was all goin' the same way, tow'd Cabazon. Figgered on makin' Seep Spring by dark. I didn't know they was buskys, though I had my suspicions. Badger tole me, just before he died, that the dinero in his boots came from the Cabazon bank, an' urged me to take it along. I didn't, howsoever. But Señor Mort an' his compadre didn't have no such compunctions about it. An' 'peared right peeved that they didn't find somethin' else."

"An honest man, are you?" Kit sneered scornfully. "Couldn't soil your hands with blood money! Or did Slager ride up before you could manage to get away with it?"

"Mebbe he did, lady." Rowdy's words were quiet, flat. He stood up, looked at her. "They's no use in our wah-wahin' any longer, bein' yuh feel thisaway about things. If yuh'll show me my cayuse, I'll saddle up an' drift along. Sleep down in the basin tonight, then go over the hills mañana."

Kit laughed suddenly, a musical little peal. "And come slipping back here before dawn to catch me while I'm asleep, huh?" she challenged. "I'm worth all of a thousand dollars, Texas, remember! A thousand pesos, hide or hoof. Mort Slager wants me that bad."

"Ma'am," said Rowdy, "you're shorely tryin' to provoke me, tonight. Ain't even halfway aimin' tuh git along with me. Howcome you are worth so much dinero to Slager? Is he why you're holed up in this cave like a catamount, dealin' hell out tuh strangers?"

"He's why," the girl said slowly. "I'm worth bounty money, Texas, because I'm an outlaw. I'm an outlaw because 'Dancer' Tanner was my father, Badger Hoke my uncle—and because of Mort Slager. He will pay a thousand dollars to anyone who takes me in to Madrone or Gustine, dead or alive. The fact that I'm a girl makes no difference to him. And that has forced me into being a man."

She turned away abruptly, muttering a most masculine oath under her breath. "Let's eat," she said. "These potatoes are burned."

As they fared well on the burned spuds and venison steaks and black coffee,

seated at an oilcloth-covered table lighted by a coal-oil lantern, Rowdy frankly studied this girl who dwelt alone in the Jicarilla fastnesses, and said she had a price on her pelt. No ordinary girl was she; not by a long jump. With tawny, tumbled hair falling to her shoulders, her face with its violet blue eyes and tilted nose betrayed in its every expression the devil within her, the tang of savagery in her burning loveliness. He noted the fine-grained look of her hands, brown and strong, but unmarked. Hard-looking, capable hands, yet small, slim-modeled. And as his gaze sharpened, sweeping over her in frank appraisal, he was conscious of her steady regard summing him up in turn, and he felt a queer warmth creep along his jaw.

Kit Tanner smiled a little, shifted her own eyes. She was lovely—this stranger's fog-gray scrutiny told her so. This strange rider into Nighthawk—whom she had almost killed, that late afternoon. Wise with the intuition of a wild animal, chameleon like, she was changing her opinion about Rowdy Davis. Instead of the potential enemy, she sensed in him a potent ally. But woman like, she intended to keep that fact to herself a while, for intuition told her that this rider from Texas had a few secrets of his own.

But when they'd finished eating, she did say quietly, "It doesn't do any good to regret for having almost killed someone by mistake. I don't expect you to forget that very soon, Texas. For I did try to kill you."

Rowdy turned his slow, crooked grin toward her. "I got no kick comin' for the way it turned out." And with a hard chuckle, "But I don't reckon I'll be in no hurry to give yuh a second try with better light to aim by. You done showed me enough, ma'am, what you c'n do with a rifle."

"Don't call me 'ma'am'!" she snapped. "My name's Kit. And—you haven't mentioned yours yet, that I've noticed!"

"I'm grieved innardly. The name's Davis—Rowdy, my friends call me." Exhaling smoke through grinning lips, he said seriously: "When you're ready, Kit, I'd like tuh hear somethin' about why you're up here, holed' out in a cave an' wearin' a mask. I'd likewise be proud to know why this Slager gent is so set on raisin' yore scalp—"

The faint crack of a rifle shot interrupted his words harshly. And as its dim echoes went rolling and tumbling across the far end of the basin, Kit Tanner looked at Rowdy as though the gun had gone off right before her eyes. They were both on their feet in a second; without a word the girl strode across the cave, jerked aside a skin covering at the mouth, and stepped out upon a ledge before the entrance. Rowdy, standing beside her, stared over and across the basin below toward the rimming rise of mountains.

The moon had risen, a disk of lemon and quicksilver, its beams making a realm of ghostly light and shadows. Over all lay the cold silence of the high ranges, broken only by the wailing, falsetto chorus of the little mountain wolves. But all that spook expanse below showed not a sign of human occupancy save their own to Rowdy's eyes, until the girl's fingers touched his arm, and he followed her indicating gesture toward the east.

There, far over the moon-stippled blackness, was a firefly caught in a silvered web. The distant gleam of a campfire in some brushy draw, way down the basin. Kit Tanner's delicate nostrils quivered like an animal cruising the air, and her eyes were inscrutable, mocking, as they flicked to Rowdy Davis' hard face.

"Company, Texas," she said softly. "Nighthawk is becoming popular—strangely, and mighty fast. A cougar or some other animal of them down yonder, I imagine."

"Likely," Rowdy said carelessly, albeit with a note of grimness that the girl didn't miss, "they're some fellers lookin' for me. Your *amigo* Slager for one, mebbe—an' a tracker he called Chone—among others." He laughed shortly, mirthlessly. "Mort must think I've got what he was lookin" for, on old Badger. He 'peared powerful anxious to find it . . . ."

"Well, haven't you?" The girl's voice was light, yet wholly without humor. And her eyes stabbed at Rowdy's as she looked full at him. He returned her scrutiny with blank visage, and at long last shook his head, just a short jerk.

"Nope. I haven't got it. But—it might happen that I do know who has!"

V

THEY were up before the first flush of dawn, that following morning. Fortified with hot coffee and flapjacks, their horses saddled, and led carefully down a narrow, winding trail along the face of a cliff from the cave mouth where the slightest misstep would have meant swift disaster upon stones and conifer spikes below. Rowdy, by the faint glow of the waning moon, could see that much. And he followed the tail of the girl's red roan as if he were treading on eggshells.

Despite the presence of that other party in the neck of the basin, Rowdy had slept soundly the night through. His wounds were sore, but not overly so; barring complications they would heal quick and without trouble. Now, in the chill of predawn, he and Kit Tanner were embarking upon a scouting foray to learn the identity of the newcomers. Kit stated that she knew a number of prime vantage points from which to observe them, and they had started early enough to preclude any give-away of her own hideout in the cliff cave.

Walking their mounts slowly along the bed of a rilling little mountain brook that tumbled between dense masses of alder and aspen, cannily hiding every track for almost half a mile in the vicinity of the cavern, the two left the water at the end of a dim game trail that snaked through the thickets in a vague down-basin direction. And they were mounting rising slopes when the growing light of dawn paled the stars.

The sun was well above the basin rim when they halted just below the top of a wooded ridge, and went the rest of the way on foot. There, on the crest, they could look over the lower neck of Nighthawk, themselves well concealed by the thick tangle of brush atop the hill. And Kit Tanner had a pair of high-power glasses in a case dangling from her shoulder, which she immediately set at focus. Rowdy, hunkered beside her, used his own naked eyes to advantage.

He needed no binoculars to show him the trio of men engaging in some sort of shenanigan a scant half mile from his roost. And Kit had seen them almost as quickly, for she grinned slyly at Jeff, winked, then raised the glasses to her face.

One of the men, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow in a big cream-colored hat, was scanning a paper in his hands, while the other two seemed to be sighting along certain landmarks, and pacing off distance according to the tall man's called directions. They had pick and shovel and ax with them, and all moved about briskly.

Two persons seemed to be at the camp, which was pitched in a well-sheltered draw, along with a number of horses and pack animals. One, apparently a cook, moved about, while the other lay on a cot beneath a shady tree, smoking and indolent. He seemed to have one arm bandaged up; when he moved at all, it was slowly.

Rowdy wasn't much interested in the camp; his attention was drawn by the trio prowling about the coulees and gulches of the scrub-tangled slopes. Kit, noting his interest, looked at him again, her white teeth glistening in a quick smile.

"They're not bounty hunters today, Texas," she chuckled. "What they are hunting is buried booty. And—it's out there in the Nighthawk all right, but the man who finds it will have to have a true map."

She handed him the glasses, sat back, and with deft fingers rolled a brown-paper cigarette. "I don't know what kind of a map they've got, but they have one. That big hombre in the white hat and shiny boots is our friend Mort Slager—in case you don't know!"

ROWDY grunted, focusing the party through the glasses. Slager indeed was a big fellow, well over two hundred in weight. Erect carriage, soft white shirt, and whipcord pants, ivory-handled sixes at each hip. Rowdy gained certain impressions at that moment: eyes deep sunken in an elongated skull, predatory nose, lipless mouth, and dark hair curling over low-set ears. A long and very black cigar was thrust at an upward tilt between his jaws.

Rowdy whistled softly. "Looks like he just stepped out of a bandbox, an' cool as a cucumber on ice. Wonder how he does it in this country?" He gave the binoculars back to Kit. "Don't friend Mort know it's bad luck to tote a white-handled gun? An' double-bad luck to carry two!"

"Not for him," replied Kit. "Unless

it's double-barreled luck that hits the other fellow! Mort Slager is just about God Almighty in the Madrone country. He owns half of it, and runs all of it."

"Yeah? Well, what's this here lost treasure he's rootin' around about? Some buried in here, yuh say?"

Kit nodded absently. "*Some* is right. Around seventy thousand dollars, more or less—in greenbacks and gold-dust. The loot of the Ringo raiders. Ever hear of Curly Bill, and his wild bunch?"

Rowdy stared. Who hadn't? Curly Bill Ringo, who cracked banks from Colorado to Arkansas, and managed to loot the stage lines and mines of so much dinero they refused to publish the amount. Curly Bill, whom report had it died under the guns of cavalrymen in the hot battle at Horsehead Crossing, where his gang was annihilated. . . .

Hell-fire! Rowdy massaged his jaw thoughtfully. That segundo of Curly Bill's —wasn't his name Tanner? Dancer Tanner? By God, it was, for a fact. The Dancer, father of this tawny-haired girl beside him with the short tresses and quirly smoke wafting about her narrowed eyes. An outlaw girl who looked upon the world as a hunted man would, yet feminine and graceful to her fingertips.

Kit was eying Rowdy sidewise. "All of Curly's men didn't die at the Horsehead, Texas," she said softly. "Not my dad, or Uncle Badger Hoke—or one called Mogollon Charley. Dad died—out there—"

Her finger indicated the fastnesses of the Nighthawk, bright under a morning sun. "Uncle Badger buried him—before he managed to crawl down over the Line to lick his wounds. And Mog Charley was afterward captured; sent to Deerfoot Lodge. Rumor has it he died there, and not so terribly long ago."

Rowdy was thinking like a prairie fire. Those three hombres had secreted some of the gang's loot up here, or knew where some had been hidden at a previous time. And bow-legged, limping old Badger had known where it was, or had a good idea where, anyhow. Likely he had enlisted Booger Red and Twister, two younger bushys to help him salvage it. And those words he'd muttered about something in the Booger's saddle horn, back there at the spring. . . .

But the girl's light laugh, at his side, drew his eyes to her. She was pointing again, mirth twisting her features.

"Look," she said. "Slager has even brought a *brujo*—a native wizard, you sabe—along. A mestizo with a *horqueta*, his mineral rod! See him prowling around, testing his 'pull'? Watch him."

Rowdy watched, saw the grizzled native grasping the prongs of the *horqueta* forks, thumbs out and palms turned up, coursing over the ground like a trailing animal. Once he laid down on his back and held the instrument above his head so that he might sense the indications more delicately. Slager, standing near, seemed absorbed in the workings of the *brujo's* wand, which that long-haired worthy called *la bara de San Ignacio*.

"I WOULD like," Kit said slowly, "to get a look at that *plata* of Slager's. Many maps of the treasure have been drawn, but none are true. I wonder where he got hold of it. Yes, I wonder—"

"Likely found it on old Badger," grunted Rowdy. "I reckon that was what he was lookin' fer, back there."

"Possible, but not probable, Texas. However, I suspect that his *plata* might be important. Slager usually doesn't set out on a wild goose chase. He and those men of his look pretty eager, somehow."

"Likely there ain't any dinero buried at all," said Rowdy skeptically. "The whole country's full of such stuff. It's jest like tryin' tuh find the pot o' gold at the foot of uh rainbow, Kit."

"You're right, Texas. But there is a pot of gold at the foot of this rainbow." The girl's voice was quiet, positive. "I happen to know—how I know does not matter. But I know, very well, the patròn of the Ringo cache. The patròn, Texas—the dead one who guards the treasure. You know the old superstition, of course."

The low intensity of her voice stilled the quip on Rowdy's tongue. And Kit finished, quietly: "That patròn happens to be my father. He is buried, over there beneath a stone upon which is to be found a carved cross, and below it the chiseled Pinwheel of our old brand."

"The—then you know where the money's hidden?" gaped Rowdy.

Kit shook her head. "No, nor does

anyone else. There is no true map, complete, in existence. Without that it will never be found."

"Well, it looks tuh me like—"

The swift pressure of her fingers against his arm silenced his words abruptly. "Keep still," she hissed, "and damned quiet. Don't move a muscle!"

The startled Texan obeyed, his eyes raking the slopes beyond. He saw nothing suspicious, but he slid his six-shooter from its holster, his nerves suddenly tight. A moment's silence, then he almost jumped out of his skin as the melodic *chip-churrs* of a scarlet tanager issued from the concealing bush above him. Rowdy batted his eyes to make sure he wasn't dreaming that those clear, musical notes were issuing from the pursed lips of the gird beside him, instead of the throat of a feathered songster.

Still staring in amaze, he saw the movement in the scrub below. And a moment later a skulking figure crossed a little open space, rifle held ready, his eyes scanning the upper slope. Apparently satisfied that his suspicion had been aroused by a bird, he went on along the ridge shoulder, intently alert for spyers.

Rowdy grinned wryly. Suspicions lulled—just like his own had been yesterday at the call of that waxwing, right before a rifle slug had peeled a lock of hair off his skull. Kit gave one more imitation, then looked at him and winked.

"How do yuh do it?" he whispered. "Danged if I ever heard 'em so plumb lifelike an' natural before."

Kit smiled.

"They're my friends. They talk to me, tell me things. I know all their notes. Sometimes it comes in—er—handy."

"Yuh needn't tell me, lady! I done been initiated."

Her brown hands were fiddling with her high-powered rifle, her eyes were following the prowler's progress below. "Guards out," she nodded. "Likely one on the opposite slopes, too. Slager knows I'm in here, somewhere, and that I'll kill him before he shall lay a finger on the cache. That tracker he mentioned about bringing after you, Texas, must be a good one. An Indio, likely. Well, we'll see."

Crawling, they left the slope and faded back to their staked horses. Kit opined that it would be a good idea to have a closer look at Slager's camp, while everyone was away save the cook and fellow on the cot. The hour was almost noon; it would be well past noon when they finished their circuitous way to their destination.

So, leaving Slager and his henchmen grubbing into badger holes and pacing off steps between landmarks, while the *brujo* trotted about with his mineral wand, the two mounted and headed behind the ridge toward the eastern nipple of the Nighthawk, taking their time in the sun's stinging rays.

Once Kit Tanner chuckled, grinned at Rowdy. I've an idea, Texas," she announced. "A darn good one. It has to do with some caves, hereabouts, that Slager or his compadres don't know of. That, and native superstition. You'll see what I mean, later."

Jeff Davis did see what she meant—but very much later.

THEY were dropping down a faint trail from a little bench into a swale when it happened. The path, zigzagging down the rocky, brush-matted flank of the hill, was not a footing to ride fast. Single file, the girl leading, they had almost reached the foot of the slope when three laired figures came to life with paralyzing swiftness. In a split-second the quiet was broken by the crack of gunfire, the lunging of horses, and hissing of cast lariats.

Two of the assailants were Indians, the third a Mex-Indio. And they moved like dark-skinned phantoms whipped by the wind. Both the red roan and Rowdy's buckskin were rearing and slashing, scared out of their wits by the unexpected swiftness and ferocity of the attack. Kit Tanner's short-barreled .38 cracked once; the roar of Rowdy's big .45 spewed a wild slug into the ether as a hard-twist rope snaked tight about his midriff, spoiling his aim. Cursing, trying to free himself, his buckskin stumbled and went down in a brushy tangle at the very foot of the trail, the jar of the tumble knocking the gun from Rowdy's hand.

On the ground, he tried to throw off the tight rope, fighting with a wild fury. Hurling himself forward recklessly, he barged into the breed clawing at Kit's bridle-bit with one hand, while the other

pinioned her pistol arm like a vise. The impact knocked the fellow loose, but also lost her insecure grasp on the weapon, which thudded to earth. But she was in the clear a moment—the main thing.

"Ride, Kit!" yelled Rowdy. "Light a shuck, *compadre!* Git while the goin's good—"

And as the snaky coil yanked taut against him, Rowdy turned with its pull and hurled himself at the Indio on its end. He heard the girl cry something—something he didn't get. The other redskin, dropping the riata which had thrown the buckskin, leapt upon Rowdy and aimed a slashing blow with his pistol at his head. He managed to dodge, but the gun hit his left shoulder with paralyzing force. Cursing, Rowdy slammed a hard right fist onto the fellow's jaw, saw him stagger—then comets and pinwheels exploded before his eyes as the first Indio whacked him across the side of the head with a cudgel.

On his knees, he heard a rolling shot, echoed by a gaspy cry. Two more cracks followed from the Indio's weapons as the drum of flying hoofs crashed, receding, through the bush. Dazed, Rowdy felt the strands of rope winding about him, rendering him helpless.

Then, dizzy and reeling and suddenly weak, he was half pushed and half dragged along a path in the scrub, hazed mercilessly by a vindictive captor who cursed steadily and savagely.

As the cause of his wrath slowly permeated Rowdy's befogged senses, the Texas drifter grinned. Not only had the girl gotten away, but she'd smashed a shoulder for the *mestizo* with a rifle bullet enroute.

Those *cholos,* Rowdy wagered grimly to himself, probably thought they'd tied-up with a jaguar cat when they tackled Kit Tanner!

VI

MORT SLAGER, seated on a canvas camp stool, drew reflectively at his long cigar and regarded Rowdy Davis evenly over its smoke.

"Young and bronco, eh?" he mused, voice impersonal. "The bold, gallant *Tejano* who battle gloriously for outraged femininity! The role is fine sounding, but damned dumb, like most maverick ideas. This is a poor time for you to lay back your ears, young man. Older wampus cats than you have gone to hell through a lass rope—for a girl. When they might have cashed in prime on her red scalp."

Rowdy shook the sweat from his stinging eyes and stared back at Slager with blank countenance. His bonds were cruelly tight; flies and gnats were torment in the blasting heat. No use bandying words with the Madrone boss, he'd decided. For despite his cold pose, Mort Slager was burning up because his henchmen had allowed Kit Tanner to slip their trap, and was in a ripe mood for anything.

"There's also a sizable reward out for you, my cocky friend," purred the big man with the dark, opaque eyes. "That little affair of the Cabazon bank, and the shooting scrape above Seep Spring which finished off Sheriff Ratchell and the high mayor of Gustine, my friend Shoap. Your name doesn't matter, but your rig and talk tags you from Texas. And—just in case you question my knowledge, I even know your road monicker—Rowdy!"

A coarse chuckle from under the joshua tree drew Rowdy's eyes. And his gaze narrowed to understanding slits as he saw the burly, brutal-faced figure of Booger Red, ostensible leader of the trio who'd fallen back there in the gunfight, leering at him. Booger Red, with his arm tight in a sling, chortling in unholy mirth at his former riding companion. Red, chewing tobacco and watching expectantly, sitting up on his tousled cot.

"Hyah, button," he said jocosely. "Kinda caught yore tail in a crack agin, didn't yuh? Gittin' tuh be quite a regular habit, yeh!"

And as Rowdy stared silently, he added: "Figgered I was a dead un back yonder, did yuh? Not ole Red! Jest winged me, thas all. I had uh ace up my sleeve what read plenty high fer a li'l' trade, like, with the gent here. You got another'n, I 'low. One that'll match mine in swap—in this here deck."

"Now *I'll* talk a while, Red," remarked Slager silkily. "If this young man proves obstinate, or deaf, to reasoning, both Chone and Salàmon are quite expert in wresting information from stubborn lips. After their little mixup with Texas a while ago, I

fancy the task would be rather to their liking."

He smiled—just a slight lifting of lips, like the grimace of a lobo. Rowdy knew he had just about as little humanity as a rattlesnake, and twice as treacherous a mind. And the most brutal forms of torture would be sweet morsels for those two 'Paches, who sat glowering at him beadily, while the *mestizo* was getting his shoulder poulticed by the native cook. Rowdy didn't need a gipsy woman to tell him that he was in a spot.

"What is it you're wantin'?" asked Rowdy sullenly.

"A bit of paper passed on to you by the late Badger Hoke," Slager said crisply. "That's all. Or—if you've already given it to the witch of Jicarilla—then a duplicate of it, my friend."

"I've got no paper—haven't seen any. What makes yuh think I have, or had? I jest got Badger far as the water-hole. . . .

SLAGER held up his hand, his face gone flinty. "Save your lies, *muchachito*. You received the paper from Hoke, all right, no mistake about that. He had it, just as Red had its other half. We learned, this morning, that one is useless without the other. Badger even told Red that he had the key to the whole *derrotero*, before that gunfight came off. Your subterfuges are quite useless, Kid. You took the paper—else you would not be here in Nighthawk Basin, cached up after the fight, and in company with Kit Tanner, whose father knew plenty about what this valley conceals."

The big boss got up, stepped in front of Rowdy, and finished: "You can make things light on yourself, young man. Trade the piece of paper for your freedom, and perhaps a cut-in on something good. Or you can remain quixotic and stubborn—and experience the methods of my good friends Chone and Salàmon, there. It's your play.

"This is no jumped-up affair on my part, I assure you. I've known of that Ringo cache for a good while; I knew that Red and Hoke were traveling toward it, with the *derrotero* as how to locate it. Red played smart and traded—when he saw his cards trumped. I knew that outlaw kid of Tanner's is hiding out up here somewhere, sorta keeping watch for the hidden loot. I intend to get the money, and also smash her at the same time. She's run loose over this neck of the woods long enough. Now that we understand each other fully, young fellow, I trust you'll see the light."

Slager flicked back his vest, displaying a five-pointed star. "I'm the recently appointed sheriff of Madrone," he said meaningly. "These men here are my deputies. If that doesn't clear things up for you by tonight, perhaps my two Apaches will. Meanwhile, you can stay thirsty this afternoon, and reflect upon the wisdom of the course you'll decide on. That'll be all—for the present."

He turned on his heel and left.

And Rowdy, trussed up like a fowl for market, did reflect upon things, and at length, as he sprawled beneath the sparse shade of a catclaw and cursed the heat and insects. The vicious-eyed Chone, Apache tracker and hunter, faded away toward the fag end of the day with his rifle, after a confab with Slager. Salàmon and the long-haired *brujo* remained at camp, as well as Slager, who lay down for a siesta. Rowdy, not far from Booger Red's cot, inched himself over that way, and getting the outlaw's attention, began to whisper. Red, feigning sleep, watched him through slitted lids.

Why should they, Red and Rowdy, give up the spoils to this gang?—Jeff Davis wanted to know. They had the pieces of *plata* showing where the treasure was—why not keep it to themselves and for themselves—and outwit this crowd? Separate the pieces were no good; together they could make a quick clean up and vamoose. The gal didn't know anything about it, Rowdy swore—she was mainly concerned in keeping clean of Slager's hounds.

His sly words found ready reception in Booger's ears. Red had gotten his half of the map from a fellow called Mogollon Charley, an inmate of the Deer Lodge pen and compadre of Red's while both were confined there. Charley had died, but at the end gave Red the paper, with word to look up Badger Hoke. Getting together below the Line, the two, along with Twister, a friend of Red's, started back to the Nighthawk. Being broke, they

cracked the Cabazon bank en route, then ran foul of the Madrone posse. It seemed that Mort Slager had been keeping cases on the Ringo cache as well, and knew more of Red and Badger than those worthies ever imagined.

And the Booger wasn't averse to bargaining, either with Mort or Rowdy. If he and the *Tejano* kid could pull a fast one over the Madrone boss, so much the better. And afterward, Booger wouldn't worry about splitting two ways. A quick shot in the bush would take the button out of the picture, after his usefulness was ended, and Red would be sole owner of some fifty thousand in greenbacks and twenty in dust. All hid away in silk oilcloth and cans.

"Where you got yore *plata?*" he husked. "Mine's where I c'n put a finger on it quick. Slager's only got a copy I made up, uh good while back. The 'riginal's safe, yet. How we gonna work hit?"

Rowdy felt a little tingle knife through him. He wouldn't trust Red as far as he could chuck a Brahma by the tail, but he could play his strategy by making the bushy-haired busky think he did. "I got it stowed safe," he whispered. "Soon's I c'n git loose from these ropes 'n things, it won't take me long to lay hand on it. You able tuh fork a hoss, feller?"

"Still kinda stove," Red growled. "Busted arm an' two, three ribs. But I reckon I could manage—if I had a cayuse. Yuh got airy plan figgered, kid?"

Rowdy nodded, eying the camp warily. "Come dark, you c'n cut me loose. After a while, you fakin' sleep, I'll sneak outa camp. Later, I'll manage to swipe a coupla hosses durin' the hullabaloo of lookin' for me, an' we'll bust clear. If we kill them three spigs there ain't nobody here else c'n trail us."

Red's eyes glinted. "Sounds purty good, Tehanner. I'll be asleep till after you're vamoosed, then I'll git my 'riginal paper an' we'll skedaddle. With a coupla rifles it won't be no trick a'tall tuh hole up in the hills an' sand off this here crew. Then we c'n dig up the cache an' light a shuck outa these parts."

"That's the idea," nodded Rowdy. "I'll see yuh 'bout dark."

Heart thudding, Rowdy cautiously rolled and inched back under the gnarled catclaw, without being observed by the resting, drowsy camp. It wasn't over an hour till sundown, but he was so thirsty his tongue felt thick as a beef's. And something—he didn't quite get it at first—was trying to impress itself upon his consciousness. And finally, sprawled flat on his back, the thing did flash its meaning across his dulled senses, and a comprehension came, his nerves suddenly tingled and tightened.

The raucous notes of a bluejay, scolding high upon the cliff beyond camp. Rowdy looked swiftly, uneasily about the stirring men. But none of them seemed to question the genuineness of the sound. The Texan drew a slow, hopeful breath. Kit Tanner wasn't very far away, but he didn't know what she was trying to tell him.

If—it *was* Kit! Rowdy wondered, then worried. Worried, as some time later, the flat spang of a rifle shot sounded far up the basin. A shot followed by silence.

Short silence in which Mort Slager, the Indio wand-wielder, and the 'Pache Salàmon looked at Rowdy Davis with sly, malignant glances. For Chone was out there, on the stalk, with orders to bring in Kit Tanner dead or alive, and a thousand-dollar bounty urging him on to employ every wile in his savage wisdom.

VII

ROWDY stared up through the thin branches at the darkening sky. Night was darkening the wilds of Nighthawk Basin, and from the glowing campfire wafted the aroma of frying meat and boiling coffee. The thongs binding Rowdy were cruelly tight, and he'd made it worse by straining and fighting them, though his legs were a bit freer. His numbed hands and gnawing thirst were the worst things, however, and he had a thumping headache from the cudgel blow the Indio had given him.

All in all he was pretty uncomfortable, as the others went to eating, ignoring him. He saw the 'Pache, Salàmon, looking keenly about for Chone, who hadn't returned. And Slager once or twice gazed over the dusking basin with growing puzzlement. That that rifle shot a while back had been anyone's but the Apache's none

of them doubted. Chone wasn't one to be tricked.

But as full night fell and Chone didn't show up, his beady-eyed compadre grew more apprehensive. He prowled the camp, sniffed the still air like a coursing animal, muttered to himself. Once he stopped before Rowdy, glowering down at him, and when Rowdy grinned slyly the redskin kicked him viciously in the ribs.

"I'll be rememberin' that, hombre!" Rowdy gritted.

Salàmon snarled, and booted him in the face. "Keepa thees in head, too, cabrone!" he spat. "I cut your liver out, *muy pronto!*"

Mort Slager, seeing the byplay, laughed. "Just a little sample of things that are going to happen to you directly, young man," he said pleasantly. "Unless—you decide to do a little talking."

Booger Red, chuckling brutally, twisted a cigarette with one hand and slouched back to his cot. As if his mirth were a cue a vibrant bird call cleft the darkness very close to the camp. So close that all of the outlaws glanced up, startled, at the first note. But Rowdy Davis lay quiet, listening intently.

Chuck! Wills-widow! Chuck! Wills-widow . . .

The cry of a whippoorwill, up there in the trees along the hill above camp, where once upon a time a slide had shaved the slope almost bare. Rowdy glanced at Slager's party, then began inching himself toward Red's cot. The group were busied about the blaze, and for the moment the restless Salàmon was occupied. Booger Red, watching warily, turned over on his side with a grunt. In his left hand he held a case knife, filched from the cutlery. For like Rowdy, he'd been disarmed.

"You'll hafta manage yore hoofs," husked Red, sawing at the thongs on Rowdy's wrists. "An' fer gawd's sake, kid, be keerful! They'll burn us both if we're ketched at this here. Keep uh clost eye on that 'Pache—he's slicker'n skunk grease. . . ."

But Rowdy was snailing away in the darkness, keeping Red's cot between himself and the fire, the severed thongs in one fist, the knife in the other. Halting by Red's saddle near the tree a moment to rest, he soon crept on. Then, quickly freeing his ankles, he began exercising his numbed muscles, wincing at the pain. The rawhide lengths he kept handy.

Salàmon was standing beyond the fire, sniffing the breeze, fingers toying with his belted knife. The *brujo* hunched by the flame, staring into it, muttering to himself. Slager, seated upon his cot, was carefully paring the tip from a cheroot, his face thoughtful and twin furrows between his eyes.

All wondering what was keeping Chone, likely. Mort Slager had just gotten his cigar to drawing good when a sound broke the stillness—a low, gasping, choking sound that froze the campers as motionless as wooden figures. It was a noise that seemed neither animal nor human, and raised the hair on one's spine.

Slager, stiffened, and with hand on pearl-handled pistol, saw the shape or apparition that came tumbling down the bare furrow on the hillside. A hideous, grisly thing with a luminous aura of light about it, slithering down the slope, arms and legs flailing limply. Even Rowdy Davis felt an icy finger tap along his spine as he stared at the queerly glowering, distorted face that was bouncing into the firelight.

SALAMON and the *brujo* were the first to give voice. With a wild yell the 'Pache wheeled and leapt away, screaming: "Chone! He is dead! He has come to tell who killed!"

And the *brujo's* voice was raised in a whining wail as he waved his arms and swayed his body, calling upon every native diety of ghosts and demons. The lifeless body of Chone came to a stop beyond the fire, sprawled limply, its face glowing with some unearthly light, the stark eyes that saw nothing, flaming red as a devil's. The camp was in a frenzy as the men milled wildly; only Mort Slager stood still, gun drawn, slitted eyes shuttling swiftly. For a moment he seemed dazed, bewildered.

And in that moment Rowdy Davis was on his hands and knees, scrambling for the closest covert of brush. Two quick shots sounded, followed by dire confusion at the horse line. Rearing, squealing, plunging, the thoroughly frightened beasts broke free of their tethers and scattered in wild stampede that swept up the basin,

their down-slashing hoofs churning brush and scrub, clattering over rocks.

Slager's camp was an uproar of yelling men, curses and wild shots. Rowdy, on his feet and running at a zigzag tangent, heard slugs whip the leaves about him, and Slager's infuriated howl. He saw Booger Red lurching and lumbering away toward the scrub, awkward on his high-heeled boots; he saw, too, a moment later, the bushy-haired busky stumble and fall, cursing savagely as a lead hammer from Slager's pistol took him flush in the back. And Rowdy saw swift forms, outlined in the firelight, chasing after him, their arms spitting sharp stabs of light.

He crashed into a tree, staggered, righted himself. Panting, he plunged on. Then it dawned on Rowdy quite suddenly that he was clear of the camp, running blindly through the trees and brush.

The sharp cry of the whippoorwill changed his direction abruptly. Once more it came, nearer this time. Panting, his chest afire and the taste of bitter salt on his lips, he barged into a tiny clearing—flush into the arms of Kit Tanner.

"You all right, Texas?" came her swift query. Rowdy tried to speak, but his lips were dry and tongue thick. He could only nod, and thrust out a hand, man-fashion, in congratulation, which the girl grasped in man-fashion. Then in very efficient silence Kit Tanner guided him away from the hullabaloo.

"How—how did yuh manage it, girl?" Rowdy croaked at length. "What'n thunder did yuh do to the 'Pache after yuh bowled him?"

Kit chuckled grimly. "Remember that idea I was telling you about today, when those men jumped us? Well, I put it over, Tex. There's a cave here with a deposit of some phosphorous looking stuff in it—one that I've used more than once for various things. When I out-stalked Chone in our little game of tag, I figured that he'd do better than a dummy, painted up some, to put the fear of God into those Spigs, and create enough diversion for me to stampede the horses and snake you loose in the furor. I didn't have any illusions as to what Slager had in store for you tonight, amigo."

"Then—then you were *shore* I wouldn't tell him—things?"

Kit looked at him, smiled. "I was pretty shore, Texas," she replied quietly. "After you saved me from capture, today."

"Well, you saved my hide, no mistake about that. Slager was fixin' to cut the 'Pache loose on me." Quickly he told her of the things he'd heard at the camp, and of his sparring with Booger Red. "Red's got his from Slager's gun," Rowdy finished. "He aimed tuh use me just as far as locatin' the cache, after gittin' him loose. Then I'd be buzzard bait out here, somer's. Likely what he had in mind for yore uncle, too, after gittin' his piece of map."

He laughed shortly; glanced at Kit, "Reckon Red's map won't be much good now, without the one Badger had. No use tuh Slager—or to us, Kit. They go together, Red told me." He shrugged.

Kit stopped suddenly, her fingers on Rowdy's arm. "What do you mean—that Red's map won't be any use—to us?" Her voice was queerly breathless. "You don't mean that—that you—?"

Rowdy nodded. "Yeah. Ole Badger whispered somethin' to me, back yonder at Seep Spring. Somethin' about lookin' in the horn of Red's saddle, the kak with the eagle-beak taps. He had it down there, at camp—clost to his cot. When he cut me loose tonight, well—I had the case knife, an' the hull was right in my way back tuh the catclaw tree, sabe?

"Red didn't give Slager the original *plata*—he'd drawed off a copy some time ago. And rememberin' ole Badger's words, well, I sorta loitered by that kak, just long enough tuh git what was in that holler place in the pommel. But it won't be no good, seein' as Badger's half is missin'."

But Kit Tanner's fingers were digging into Rowdy's forearm. "Thank God," she whispered. "At last! At *long* last, Rowdy!"

"Wha—what d'yuh mean?"

"I mean," she said slowly, softly, "that I've got the other half of the *plata,* Texas! And Ringo's cache is ours!"

VIII

A DAY passed, and another after that. And although Rowdy got a good deal of rest and recuperation from his

hurts, he and Kit Tanner were not idle. A foray the first afternoon netted them Rowdy's buckskin and a couple of sturdy pack mules, part of the stampede bunch which were still running loose. The next morning Davis luckily put the 'Pache Salamon out of commission by a long, lucky shot with the girl's rifle, sending a slug through his leg. The others, leery and nervous because of this unexpected sniping from queer angles of the basin, kept pretty close to cover, fearful of exposing themselves to such guerilla tactics.

And when Kit winged a second member of the crowd, the fuming Slager called a council of war in his camp. Believing the piece of *plata* he had from the deceased Red was an original, he felt certain that the other half wouldn't do the girl and Rowdy any good, and decided to content himself with merely watching. So that second afternoon he posted his remaining men at high points in the Nighthawk, and laired up; he didn't want to weaken his force further by playing the girl's game, because he knew she savvied every hollow and trail in the basin and could easily elude any searchers, barring accident to herself.

MOONLIGHT quilted the cedars and pines about the slope where Dancer Tanner lay beneath the smooth slab of stone, far across the basin from the hideout cave lair of Kit on the mountain shoulder. It shone wanly upon the rock marker almost overgrown with vines and creepers —a slab rudely carved with a cross, and beneath it the Pinwheel of the ancient Tanner iron.

And in the moonlight of that brush-matted hillside two dim figures were moving about, the third night following Rowdy Davis' escape from the camp of Mort Slager. A night still and windless and cool, one on which sounds would carry far.

The night Kit Tanner and Rowdy decided to make a try for the buried cache.

In a ravine below the slope their horses waited, and a pack mule which had carried a pick and shovel and several clean-trimmed sapling poles. Heads close together over the shielded glow of a match, the two bent above the *plata* a moment, then started following its directions from the head of Dancer Tanner's tomb. Dancer, the *patròn* of the treasure cache.

They walked, in silence, some hundred yards westerly to where a crumbling elbow of reddish scarp thrust from the hill. Scrambling up this, Kit sighted along its knifelike edge toward another outcrop two hundred paces distant, clearly identified in the map. A cleft outcrop, in whose crack a gnarled juniper thrust its crooked limbs to the sky.

Twelve paces below, a rugged and sharp-knobbed black rock showed in a veritable devil's maze of thorny growth; a matting so thick that Rowdy had to hew an entry to the motte with the ax. The rock was perhaps five feet long by as many across, and weighed considerable. It was weathered, moss-rimmed and water-channeled by years of exposure to the elements. And five feet beneath that black boulder lay bonanza—or borrasca.

Clearing a short space in which to swing the pick, Rowdy took up the implement and drove it with all his might into the earth. Kit stood silent, watching, her breath coming a bit fast and her face a trifle pale. After all, this was quite a moment.

Neither girl nor man spoke, save in terse undertones; only the ringing strokes of pick or shovel were heard in the night stillness. Rowdy worked fast, the sweat rilling from his face. He stripped to the waist, sinking the moat deeper about the black rock. Kit spelled him with the shovel, working surely and efficiently. A foot and a half down the lower edges of the rock appeared, and Rowdy began inserting the saplings beneath the rim.

Using them as levers, and securely blocking the upthrust of the rock with stones, it was the work of but some ten minutes to traction the slab upright, then tilt it over backwards, where it landed with a thud in the brambles.

Scarce pausing, Rowdy snatched the pick again and fell to. The *plata* said that the treasure was not buried deep. Breath panting, he made the dirt fly. The sounds of their excavating would carry far in the night, he and Kit knew. And they were not over three-quarters of a mile from Slager's camp.

The girl was dividing her time between shoveling and watching the hillslope when abruptly a stroke of Rowdy's pick gave

off a dull, hollow sound. The next buried the point to the haft in mushy dirt, and Rowdy grabbed the shovel. Kit, kneeling close to the hole, was staring down with blazing eyes.

At last Rowdy grinned up at her with sweat and dirt-grimed countenance. "Eureka, kid!" he said hoarsely. "It's bonanza, after all!"

For a moment Kit Tanner couldn't speak. For there, exposed to view in a square hole hewed from hard earth, lay two sealed cans, and a big package bound with animal hide, containing another packet of oiled silk. Fifty thousand in greenbacks—twenty in gold dust—

Bonanza . . . the pot at the foot of the rainbow! Cached loot that belonged to no man now, save him who might be lucky enough to find it. No ownership involved, no ancient claims upon it. Sheer fortune for the lucky rainbow chaser. Chasers, Kit and Rowdy. . . .

They stared at one another. Those heavy cannisters, sealed tight; that bulky package sewed in deerskin. Tugged free from their long grave, lying dirty and stained and fascinating in the moonlight. And once again, as they had upon another night not long past, the two shook hands. Shook hard, in a grip of men—

A rifle crashed the silence of the high hills, and its slug sang through the copse in which man and girl stood. Zipped just above their heads, and hard upon the echo of its spang came the triumphant shout: "Got 'em, boys! Close in, and do a good job!"

And a fusillade of bullets peppered the motte, flaying leaves and limbs. Mort Slager and his coyotes, hearing the digging, had slunk up the hillside undetected, ringing the shallow hole about with drawn guns.

Was it to be bonanza, or borrasca, after all? Rowdy Davis asked himself that grim question as he flung down into the pit, grabbing up his laid-aside pistol. Two against five—devil's odds—

IX

KIT, levering a cartridge into the firing chamber of her rifle, hit the dirt beside Rowdy. She, as well as Rowdy, knew that it would be a scrap to the finish, now. No quarter asked or given.

Her rifle spat, and a man downhill yelped sharply. Rowdy, grinning wickedly, lined down on another flash, and the threshing about of a hit fellow came clear. He and Kit, conserving their ammunition, were shooting cannily. Men who knew Jeff Davis admitted that he was blue hell with a hogleg. Rowdy had never admitted it, though he had proved the fact more than once.

But in Kathleen Tanner he saw one of the damnedest rifle shots he'd ever looked upon—her aim and quickness and precision were nothing less than uncanny wizardry. And the well-directed slugs that she sent zipping at her targets quickly had Slager's sidewinders hugging ground belly down, or crouched behind windfalls.

Soon Mort Slager's voice came up to them. "You can't win out, you two! Come out of there with your hands up, and you are free to leave unharmed. Free as air."

"What's the matter, Mort?" Rowdy taunted. "Ain't you tryin' yore luck? Come on up an' git acquainted, why don't yuh?"

"You better listen, fellow!" Slager said after a bit. "This is the last chance. You're holding two aces, and I have the other two. Whoever gets the joker will win. And, white-haired kid, the joker is ten sticks of dynamite en route from camp. Laugh that off!"

"You don't know me, Mort," retorted Rowdy. "Drawin' jokers out of my sleeve is my specialty. Last deal comin' up, feller!"

HE and Kit stared at each other. If Slager really had sticks of dynamite, he could blast them to smithereens in short order. And the chances were ten to one that Slager did have the explosive, for he had come to Nighthawk primed for operations. Kit's face was a pale oval in the moonlight as she grinned wryly at Rowdy.

"If he's not bluffing," she said quietly, "we're out of luck."

"Well," Rowdy countered, "we ain't licked yet. My dad always said that a feller had a chance so long as he was hidehole an' not too proud tuh pray. Reckon

I'll have a look-see if there ain't a card stuck up my sleeve, Kit."

And as Rowdy started creeping over the edge of the hole, her widened gaze fixed upon him suddenly. "Come back, you blessed fool!" she hissed. "Rowdy!—listen to me—!"

But Rowdy, filtering along the slope, didn't hear. He was making for the rustling sounds below and to the left, wiggling forward on his stomach. And flanking a jutty outcrop of shale, he almost butted into a hunkered man, who turned swiftly with a mutter:

"That you, Jeep?"

The crashing barrel of Rowdy's .45 toppled him limp, his cry of warning stifled. Another wallop laid the man cold—and drew a swift shot from the cache crater which cut through a sotol stalk above Rowdy's head. He ducked, the dry fronds of the cactus rattling loudly.

"You, Squint?" came Slager's sharp voice. "You hit?"

Rowdy groaned, mumbled something, began twisting quickly toward the sound. Slager was in a little hollow just below—he and another fellow. Rowdy could vaguely make out forms in movement, as he jockeyed for a shot. Slager was cursing under his breath.

Slowly Rowdy drew up his left arm and flung the rock in his fist beyond the pair, across the gulch. It landed with a loud clatter, bounding among the bushes. Slager, with a snapped oath, shot in the direction instantly, fanning his hammer three times in quick succession. Little stabs of light marked his stance. . . .

"Here's that jick in the game yuh asked for, Slager!" And with the grim words Rowdy fired, twice. The big boss of Madrone shot one more time, but a dead finger pressed trigger. And the crash of his body could be heard, far, as it hit the earth.

"Slager's dead! Look out, hombres—that lobo's loose!"

Shouting the dread warning, Slager's companion fled precipitately along the brush-choked gully. And other sounds of hasty retreat came from other points of the compass. "What's the matter, you sidewinders?" challenged Rowdy, his voice ringing. "Losin' yore taste for lead?"

NO shots answered him as the leaderless, crippled survivors of the pack fanned away. They didn't want any more of the drifter's medicine; Slager had hung back and let them take it, and now Slager was dead. Grinning through his grime and sweat and stains of blood, Rowdy limped uphill to join Kit Tanner near the copse. She was coming to meet him, her eyes questing and anxious.

"Hurt, Rowdy?" she asked quickly. She stepped close to him, her hand going to his arm. And the moonlight in her eyes told Jeff Davis plainer than any word that her life was to be forever bound with his. Rowdy stared at her a long moment, his own heart and thoughts naked for her to know.

His arm went about her, he felt hers flash swiftly around his shoulders. Smiling a little, breathing a little hard, they just looked—into each other's eyes so very near.

Jeff Davis drew a deep breath.

"Well, Señorita Millionaire," he asked, "what are you aimin' to do with all yore *dinero?*"

Kit shook her head slightly, her gaze never leaving Rowdy's. "What are you aimin' to do with yours, Texas?" Her voice was throaty, and very soft. The moon, breaking clear of a fleecy scud of cloud, outlined them whitely for a fleeting moment.

"Go back tuh Texas," Rowdy nodded emphatically. "To a climate that fits my breeches. They's too much promiscuous shootin' goin' on in this neck uh Nueva Mex. I know the dandiest *ranchita* down in the Nueces *brasada* that a wanderin' range tramp ever dreamt of—pepper trees in the yard, an' everything."

Kit Tanner seemed to think that over, head cocked sideways and eyes quizzical.

"Well—I'll be in trouble—if I stay around here." Her voice was tingly, her breath hot against Rowdy's cheek. "Plenty of hot water, cowboy. Under the circumstances—don't you reckon I had better go to Texas, too?"

"I'll tell the cockeyed West! From now on out!"

Not until then did Rowdy Davis' exultant lips seek her mouth—and found it warm and yielding and eager as his own!

The Canyon of Wanted Men

By FRANCIS JAMES

Foster was the law—Wayne the lawless. Yet in that midnight canyon of wanted men, their spitting Colts were strangely mated.

FINGERS gripped on the gun-butt, a solitary rider spurred his sorrel pinto down from the mountain rim of the darkening valley. A lone wolf of vengeance, sweeping in for the kill!

In the yard of the big ranch house with the Z-Bar-S sign over the high-pole gateway, he pulled rein. Without

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dismounting, he lifted his voice in a shout:

"Hello!"

A figure stepped out through the open door onto the piazza. Heavier than the rider, the newcomer was plump and soft-fleshed as a woman. His round, full-cheeked face was seamed with lines of dissipation, small, close-set eyes, pointed nose and crafty, knife-slit lips that gave him the appearance of an overfed rat.

"Who the hell are you, making all the racket?" he bawled out. Suddenly his voice choked, clogged in his throat. In the glow of the house-lights, his face blanched putty-hued as he stared at the man on the red mustang.

The rider was young, slender but well knit; gray eyes, copper hair, clear-skinned but bronzed, and with square, clean-cut chin and an upward turn to his nose. His face, normally smiling, was hard and set. His eyes glowed with flame as his fingers caressed the butt of his six-gun.

"Paul Wayne, by God!" The words rasped from the other man's throat in a gritting snarl. "What are you doing back here, you fool? I can drop you where you stand and collect a thousand dollars on your head."

"Move uh finger half an inch toward yore pants and yuh're dead, Freddy Woods." Wayne's voice stung cold and mocking as the cut of a whiplash. "Git back into the house and tell yore paw I want to see him out here, damn pronto."

"He isn't here. He's gone to Sunset for the night," Fred Woods spat back.

"Oh—he's went to Sunset for all night, has he?" Wayne echoed thoughtfully. "Well, I dunno's it makes much difference. What I come here to say goes for both uh y'u polecats. Pin back yore ears and don't forget nothing I tell yuh, Woods.

"Last year, down under the line, I been ridin' with my ears open and my mouth plugged, and I done found out plenty about some things that I suspicioned was true a long time ago. Yore old man is the one that's behind the cow-rustlin' that's been goin' on the last couple uh years from about every outfit fifty miles both sides uh yores. He's done covered his tracks so good that there ain't hardly nobody that suspicions that the stock that's run south from all these ranches comes right back north again. The gang uh outlaws yore old man's got ridin' for him drives the steers down under the border, lays low till the trails is clear and then wrangles them back up north again, inside uh his fence. What they steal outa his range for uh bluff they just put back again. I did suspicion it, and that's why he sent Ed Vickers tuh gun me down. I got tuh my iron first, but all the witnesses was his riders and I had to drag my loop in uh hurry afore they done perjured muh neck into uh rope."

FRED WOODS licked his jerking, ash-dry lips and surged a step forward with murderous rage.

"Shut up, you murdering outlaw liar!" he stormed. "Who'll take your word against ours? You haven't got proof enough to hang a cat."

"Old Maverick Mawson was sheriff then," Wayne went on, ignoring the outburst. "He was jest about ready tuh drop his loop over yuh when he done died uh lead poisonin' in the back. Will Foster was one uh Maverick's deppities, and they done picked him tuh fork into the saddle that Maverick left empty. And now yore paw's outfit uh crooks is ridin' to get him from behind, the same as they done Maverick.

"Yuh ain't satisfied with that, though. Yo're hirin' some one to spread around rotten talk about him and that Mex girl, Rosa Romero. That part uh the play is yore idea. Lucy Hemenway has promised to marry Will, and yuh want her yorself. Yuh savvy damn well yuh ain't got uh hog's chance against Will, straight shootin'. Lucy's the finest girl ever lived, and her heart's nigh busted with all this."

Wayne leaned down an inch closer toward the white, insanely working face of the man on the piazza.

"Me and Will Foster are buddies, Woods," he snarled, his teeth showing between his drawn lips. "We was punchin' together on the old Tangled-Q afore we split. We've been hungry and thirsty together, cold and wet. For days at a time we've squatted in rock holes and held off the greasers till help came. We've been through the kind of things together that makes men shore as hell pardners under the hide, even if one is uh sheriff and

t'other's an outlaw with uh price on his head.

"What I come back two hundred miles to tell yuh was that I'm here to help Foster ride trail on yuh varmints till yuh've spread yore last roundup in hell. That'll make two of us, instead of one, against yore bushwhackin' rats. More than that, let me hear uh one more rotten whisper against Will's name—that he's anything but the cleanest, whitest man that God ever made, and I won't wait tuh meet yuh out in the open. I'll come back here again, and I'll come shootin'. Can yuh understand that, yuh damned little double-crossin' skunk louse, or have I got to say it plainer?"

Fred Woods' white lips jerked in a crooked snarl over his grinding teeth.

"Get out of here! Get out before I call my men and have you shot where you stand," he foamed. "Get out, you—"

"Don't worry none. I'm goin'—where the air's free uh the stink uh lyin' carrion," Wayne gritted back. "But don't forget none what I've done told yuh—"

Wayne dug spurs into his pinto and pulled him cavorting around on his hind legs, front hoofs pawing sky, flank muscles swelling into bunches with his impatience to be gone. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a glint of light coming from the shadows on the piazza where Woods stood. As he jabbed spurs into the pinto's flank and crouched low in the saddle, the whip-crack report of an automatic slashed through the drumfire of galloping hoofs.

The slug screeched past Wayne's head. Out behind the hoofs of the pinto a spray of dust and gravel rattled like hail on the house windows as he went tearing around the curve of the driveway and out of sight.

HALF a mile down the main highway from Woods' place, Wayne pulled his horse off into a narrow dirt road. Rapidly the landscape grew wild and rugged. The rolling sweep of the rangeland steepened into a surf of criss-crossing granite billows breaking against the foothills of the mountain range. A cool wind, spicy with the tang or *piñon* sap and damp earth, soothed Wayne's face.

Mile after mile the red pinto clicked away in his running walk. Deep down through the cleft the full moon poured a yellow flood of light over Wayne, who rode absent-mindedly, his thoughts far away.

He was home again—home in the country where he and Foster had rolled their blankets side by side under the stars; crooned cowboy ditties in close harmony to the squeak of saddle leather and the click of hoofs as they rode guard over the bedded herds in the long nights; split the last thumb-pinch of makings over the eddying streamers of camp-fire smoke. Back here in the hills where every gully and ridge was familiar to him as the palm of his hand, he would lie now.

Not letting Foster suspect that he was within a hundred miles, he would ride guard on his back trail, a partner invisible, his loop dragging wide for any bushwhacking outlaw before he had time to strike.

The pinto swung around a corner in the trail, snorted and shied sidewise. Before Wayne could grab up his reins and jerk for his gun, the gleam of steel flashed out from the figure on horseback that stood wedged back into a cleft of the canyon wall.

"Hands up! Claw sky and keep clawin', y'u rustlin' varmint—"

THE voice from the face hidden under the two-gallon hat gasped into an oath of amazement as Wayne moved forward. The moonglow fell on his square-built, wiry figure, clean-cut chin and jaw and on the sheriff's star glittering against his shirt.

"Paul Wayne!"

"Bill Foster, or I'll be damned!"

The two men sat staring at one another, tense-muscled. One with his arms shoved high in the air, the other with the gun-snout beaded for a kill.

Bill Foster's face was gray and haggard, his voice jerkily hoarse when he spoke again.

"God knows I wan't lookin' tuh see y'u here none tonight, Paul, but now that our trails have crossed, I got to take y'u. Yo're wanted for killin' Ed Vickers and rustlin' Tangled-Q stock besides. Do y'u agree to go along peaceable, or have I got to take yore gun and handcuff y'u?"

"I'll answer that question in five min-

utes, Will," Wayne said. "I give yuh my word not to start nothing till then, if yuh'll forget that yo're sheriff for that long and powwow uh little chin music, for old times' sake."

Foster nodded and slipped his gun back into the holster.

"All right, Paul—five minutes fer old times' sake it is."

Wayne spurred his horse to Foster's side and held out his hand.

"Shake?"

Foster shot out his hand. For a long instant the two men sat motionless, eyes locking, fingers gripped, their pintos rubbing noses as they stood face to face.

"In God's name, what brought y'u north again thisaway, Paul?" Foster exclaimed, husky-voiced as their hands fell apart. "Don't y'u never reckon to learn nothing till it's too late?"

"Oh, I dunno—sorta got to hankerin' for uh smell uh the old range again, I reckon," Wayne grinned. "How's tricks? Lucy O. K.? When yuh two aimin' tuh git spliced?"

The troubled look on Foster's face grew deeper.

"Lucy, she ain't been feelin' so good, lately," he sighed, shaking his head. "Seems like it's somethin' a-frettin' her."

"How yuh makin' out, tryin' tuh hang yore loop over the outfit that's been wranglin' all the wet stock business, Will?" Wayne went on. "Yuh savvy that Tom Woods is back uh all that, don't yuh?"

"Shore thing. I've knowed that for uh long time," Foster nodded. "A breed by the name of Estaban Zorello wrangles the outfit that does the dirty work. But droppin' uh loop over him is harder than ropin' uh jack-rabbit. I've got an idea that his hang-out is some place deep in the bad lands t'other side of uh pass they call Dead-Horse Canyon. Ever hear of it?"

Wayne shook his head.

"Never."

"Well, I ain't done much more than that," Foster grunted. "No idea how to get to it, nor what lays beyond it. . . . The five minutes is up. Paul. Do y'u give me yore word to go along without makin' no trouble?"

Wayne shook his head.

"I don't aim to go with you, Will," he said briefly. "I've got uh job uh work to wrangle up here and I can't waste no time founderin' around in no steel corral."

Foster sat staring at him an instant, his face rigid and gray in the moonlight.

"Paul—it's been more'n uh year since y'u and me split and our trails forked," he whispered hoarsely. "There ain't never been a day since then that I didn't dread the time that y'u'd mebbeso come back and we'd have to tangle. For God's sake, don't make it any worse than it's got to be. Don't make me gun y'u down—"

WAYNE opened his mouth to speak and sat frozen. From around the next turn in the canyon came the drumfire of galloping hoofs.

A moment later, a horse and rider came dashing into sight. The pinto was running wild, no hand on the reins. To and fro the rider swayed and pitched in the saddle, each jump of the animal almost sending him headfirst to the ground.

Wayne drove spurs into his pinto and grabbed the bridle of the horse as it came galloping up. Foster swept out an arm and caught the rider as he started to reel into space.

Wayne swung off and held Foster's horse while he eased the white-haired old man down to the ground. A red stain was widening slowly over the tattered shirt front. Already the glaze of creeping death was filming over his watery eyes.

"It's old Hemenway—Lucy's paw!" Wayne muttered. "Somebody's done got him this time, for sure—"

"Lucy's gone—kidnapped," a husking whisper came from the old man's feebly stirring lips. "Zorello's gang came to the cabin—too many fer me. I was ridin' tuh find y'u, Will, afore I checked out—"

The whispering died away into silence. The old man's head dropped to one side.

His face ashy white in the moonlight, Foster looked up at Wayne.

"Great God! Zorello's got Lucy—the old man's dead!" he gasped.

"That's Fred Woods' work," Wayne jerked back. "He's always wanted her—knowed he couldn't get her no other way—"

"Hark!"

Foster held up a hand for silence.

Again the clicking drum-fire of hoofs was echoing down the canyon. But many riders, this time, instead of one—

A DARK bunch of mounted forms dashed into sight around the turn. At sight of the two men in front of him, the leader of the troop reined up suddenly. For a few seconds he sat motionless, trying to make out who they were in the uncertain light.

"Some uh Zorello's outfit, ain't they—gang that Woods has got ridin' tuh get yuh?" Wayne muttered to Foster.

A chorus of whooping yells wiped out Foster's reply. The riders had recognized him by the silver star glinting against his shirt. The next instant the crash of gunfire and the roar of clattering hoofs split deafening echoes against the walls of the gulch.

"Come on, Will—over here!"

Wayne grabbed Foster's arm and whirled toward a spot some fifty or sixty feet distant at the base of the canyon flank where a pile of boulders, rolled down by the spring cloudbursts, reared a house-high talus. In a flying leap he hurdled the top of the first boulder and dropped down on the back side. A flock of slugs crashed against the granite face and went ricochetting off into space with spanging screams as Foster came tumbling down at his side.

Cautiously, the two men shoved each an eye and one corner of a forehead around the rock flank and fired back. The boulder pile lay in black shadow from the wall above. But the group of riders who came whirling down to a stop out in front were in dazzling moonlight.

A pair of voices grunted curses of agony as the first two slugs from the forty-fours slammed home at target range. Before the ambushers had time to spill out of their saddles and scatter to cover, two more had pitched up their arms and dropped in kicking heaps.

"Four down, five more left out there now," Wayne's voice tallied in a curt whisper as he peered craftily over the top of the rock. "Not at all bad for uh start."

Fifteen or twenty minutes passed. From their cover out on the canyon bottom, the outlaws were pouring a steady rain of lead into the rock pocket. Foster and Wayne used their cartridges sparingly, playing grim bull's-eye practice as they fired back at the flashes.

One by one, the five places from which the orange tongues of flame spat into the dark dwindled to four, to three, to two.

"Some shootin', Will. If this kinda luck holds, we'll be outa here right soon," Wayne grunted over his shoulder to Foster.

Foster did not reply. Wayne half swung around and looked across at him.

Foster was staring backward, up over the slope of the canyon wall behind them. Down over the steeply slanting face of the talus three dark figures were barely visible less than ten feet away as they came stealing noiseless and sinister as huge spiders. Intead, of having been killed, the trio had simply left the other two men below to draw the attention of Foster and Wayne with frontal fire while they detoured. They worked their way up the rock pile on either side and crept down in the rear.

As Wayne looked back, Foster jerked his gun and fired. In the treacherous blotting of shadows and gloom, he missed. Wayne fired and also missed.

Spitting yellow tongues roared out of the gloom overhead. Wayne felt a streak of flame sear over his shoulder. He heard Foster groan as he staggered and half spun around.

Wayne grabbed the sheriff and yanked him down to the bottom of the rock pocket. There, in the pitch dark, they were out of sight of the raiders. The next instant the three figures came down upon them.

Foster and Wayne had both been caught with their guns nearly empty. The three shots they had fired were all that remained in the chambers. There was no time to reload.

Clubbing his iron, Wayne lunged to his feet as a big-hatted giant came clattering and cursing down side of him. The steel-shod butt of the .44 flashed up and dropped like a pole-axe. The Mexican gasped out one last garlic-flavored oath and crumpled down at his feet.

A yard to the right, Will Foster's figure came swaying up to his feet. His revolver was gone. In his left hand a hunting-

knife gleamed silver in the starlight.

Wayne saw the second Mexican swing his revolver toward Foster. He whirled his gun-butt and lunged again. There was the sodden thud of shattering bone. The outlaw pitched forward on his face onto the rocks.

Snarling curses, the third attacker jumped back out of reach of Wayne's death-dealing club. His gun swung up, beaded on Foster's white face as he stood backed up against the rock.

With a straight-arm swing, Wayne sent his gun spinning end over end. The ten-inch steel club crashed the Mexican between the eyes. His revolver clattered out of his hand onto the rocks as he staggered back and then caved down in a heap.

Running feet gritted over the rocks on the other side. Wayne stopped, jerked the gun from the limp fingers of the dead man at his feet, swung around and fired at two shapes that came scrambling up over the rocks out of the canyon bottom.

The man dropped. Wayne shifted the six-shooter to the second one and jammed trigger again.

A burst of orange fire blended with the belching red flame from the mouth of Wayne's gun. Two ear-splitting reports roared into one. Out in the moonlight, the outlaw threw up his arms, stumbled a couple of steps and pitched forward onto his face.

Wayne swabbed the smoke-grimed sweat out of his eyes and swung around to Foster.

"How bad yuh hurt, Will?" he exclaimed anxiously. "Where did he get yuh?"

"In the shoulder. Numbed my arm for uh minute, but it's all right now." Foster stooped, started to pick up his gun, jerked out an oath and dropped his hand to his belt.

Behind them, a foot gritted softly against a stone. Wayne spun around. The Mexican he had stunned leaped like a puma from his squatting crouch. The moonlight glinted from the butt of the clubbed gun spinning a vicious circle at the end of his whirling arm.

As Wayne flung up his arms in a desperate effort to cover, he saw the hunting-knife in Foster's fist dart a gray-steel fang through the moonlight. The outlaw screamed a curse as the blade sank to the hilt between his ribs.

The same split-second, the gun butt crashed on Wayne's head. A flood of crimson light volcanoed through his brain. He felt himself falling, falling through endless space spangled with yellow stars.

WAYNE opened his eyes and looked around.

For an instant, facts and nightmares swam in his head in a dizzy whirl. Gradually he made out that he was lying on the gravel bottom of the rock pocket. Dim, motionless shapes lay crumpled together over the boulder flanks.

Save for the stamping and nickering of horses somewhere out of sight, it was deathly still.

Painfully, Wayne pushed himself up to sitting. His legs, arms and body were O.K. His head throbbed in blinding, dizzying waves. Fumblingly, he undid the handkerchief about his neck and tied it around the bleeding furrow in the side of his head. The outlaw's gun butt had side-swiped him as Foster's knife struck home.

Wayne dug a match out of his pocket and made a light. One after another, he held the flickering little flame to the faces of the motionless forms around him.

Hard-bitten, sin-furrowed faces, beard-matted and grimed with dirt, all of them —Zorello's outlaws, and all dead. Will Foster was nowhere in sight.

As well as if Foster were there to tell him, Wayne knew what he had done. With seconds of priceless value, he could not wait for him, Wayne, to come to. Down into the hades of Estaban Zorello's hideaway was where Fred Woods' kidnapers had taken Lucy Hemenway. Foster did not yet know the way to get there. One fighting chance he had against a cold deck of poisoned luck. While the trail was still hot, he had ridden south in a desperate attempt to pick it up. He might succeed and he might not. Probably not. If he did, it would be him alone, with his gun arm half out of commission, against the other half of Zorello's cut-throats—

Wayne fumbled around in the dark till he located the dead outlaw's cartridge belt. He unbuckled it, pulled it out from under the nerveless form and strapped it around him. With the six-shooter reloaded and

back in the holster, he climbed over the big boulder and started picking his way down over the treacherous footing back to the canyon bottom.

Foster's horse was gone, but Wayne's pinto stood peacefully cropping birch saplings. Wayne caught him without trouble and climbed into the saddle. His face shown grim in the cold white light of the moon as he dug the spurs into the red mustang.

IT was half an hour after midnight when Wayne pulled the pinto down to a halt in the Z-Bar-S ranch yard again. Lights showed against the curtained windows in the lower part of the house. The blare of a radio and sounds of chattering voices drifted out. Fred Woods was throwing a party, Wayne decided. It stood to reason that he would take care to plant a good alibi for himself the night Lucy Hemenway was kidnaped.

Wayne did not risk another summons to Woods. He knew the sound of his voice would bring an answer from the darkened upper windows of the house—an answer of smoking lead.

Back in the shadow of a big cottonwood, he slid out of the saddle and slipped the reins down over the pinto's neck, knowing that thus he would stand motionless till wanted. He unhooked the lariat from his saddle horn, settled his open-topped holster an inch farther around toward the front and started tiptoeing soundlessly toward the house.

The noise inside deadened the slight sound of his feet as he ascended the creaking steps and felt for the knob. In one sweeping motion, he shoved the door wide and strode in across the narrow hall to the room where six men sat bunched around a table loaded with cards, chips and glasses.

"Throw up yore hands and set quiet, gents."

Wayne's whip-crack command from the doorway was the first intimation that half of the party had of his presence. For an instant of black amazement, Fred Woods' guests sat petrified, their jaws sagging as they stared at the stony-faced, dust-covered figure with the long-barreled six-gun rock-steady in his fingers. With grimly deliberate carelessness, Wayne was twirling the ever-widening loop of a lariat in his left hand. Dead in front of him, ten feet away, Fred Woods sat with his face thunder-black with rage.

"Damn you, what are you back again for, you fool?" he yelled, hoarse-voiced with rage. "Put up that gun and get out of here before you're dropped in your tracks—"

The twirling loop in Wayne's hand widened a shade and went spinning through the air. It dropped over Woods' head and tightened around his arms and shoulders as Wayne took in the slack with a jerk.

"Damn you, let me go!" Woods screeched, kicking and struggling against the rope. "I'll cut your heart out for this—"

Wayne threw his weight back sharply, jerking Woods out of his chair. The table upset as he slammed against it, sending chips and glasses clattering to the floor.

A man in the back of the group made a motion with his hand toward his hip. Wayne's gun roared. The man yelled as the bullet ploughed through his arm and flung his hands aloft.

Wayne yanked back again. Woods tripped over a chair and sprawled on his face. Dragging the cursing man behind him like a fish on a line, Wayne backed out through the doorway into the yard.

Fifty feet down the driveway, where the pinto stood waiting, he hauled in the slack, gripped Woods by the shirt front and jerked him to his feet.

"Listen, yuh yeller hound," Wayne gritted into his eyes, as he fished his clothes for a gun. "Me and yuh are goin' tuh find Lucy Hemenway. Don't waste no time lyin' tuh me that yuh don't know where she is. Zorello's got her—at yore orders. If yuh don't show me the trail to ride to her, or if we get there too late, I aim to hang yuh up by the thumbs over uh slow fire and skin yuh alive. I went down to yore corral and wrangled yuh a hoss jest now afore I done made my call at yore party. He's waitin' uh little piece ahead there around the turn. Come on, polecat—we're goin' tuh ride."

Past the sweet-scented green of the rangeland, deep into the granite-

toothed sea of foothills breaking around the mountain flanks, Wayne roweled the red mustang in a merciless gallop. Twenty feet in front of him Woods traveled, one foot lashed to the stirrup, a length of lariat roping the animals together.

Woods' big black horse was cream-flecked with lathered foam. Woods' face was pasty green. Wordless curses foamed on his tight-strained lips as he shot murderous glances back at Wayne from time to time over his shoulder.

For some hour or two after they left the Z-Bar-S, Woods' course took them through country that Wayne knew by heart. Then Woods swung off toward the east, into a region he had never visited, knew only by hearsay.

Hours passed.

Savagely Wayne thundered at Woods' heels. On and on he lashed him into a gallop with stinging blows of his quirt whenever the livid-mugged, cursing man slackened speed.

Steadily now the terrain grew wilder and rougher. Knife-bottomed gorges between ridges sheer as house sides gashed the suffering earth with a chaos of criss-crossing scars. Necessarily the pace of the horses fell to a lope and then to a walk.

The moon rode low over the saw-toothed line of the hills. Dawn was near. Deep in the bowels of a chasm whose black flint walls reached up in dizzy lurches to the stars, a breeze came blowing, bearing sounds that caused Wayne to pull the mustang down to a stop and sit motionless, listening. The click of hoofs and the dull muttering of bedded cattle. . . .

"Zorello's hide-out!" Wayne grunted. "We're there."

Wayne sat an instant longer, before he slid off his horse. He tethered both animals to some scrub spruces, trussed Woods' hands behind him with a bit of lariat. Gun in hand, he cut the lashings that bound the prisoner's feet in the stirrups.

"Onfork. We're leavin' the hosses here and makin' the rest of it afoot," he said curtly.

Stiffly, Woods half climbed, half fell out of the saddle. Wayne gripped him by the slack of the shirt front and jerked him up till his white, snarling face was within six inches of Wayne's.

"Get this, yuh black-souled miscreant," he growled through his teeth. "From now on, yore travelin' three feet ahead uh me, with my gun bedded down on yore short ribs—and yore travelin' uh heap quiet, savvy? If anything goes wrong, I'll have time enough to jam trigger once afore I go out—which same will be all it will take to send yuh hightailin' tuh hell. Step up ahead now, and don't forget nothing, mister snake."

THE path rose steeply to the crest of the pass. Wilder and grander the scenery grew. The alabaster flood of moonlight blocked out the canyon walls in a madman's chaos of naked white and black, a Golgotha of barren savagery, bleak and desolate as the wastes of the moon.

Wayne and the cursing, muttering man ahead of him came to the peak of the gorge and dropped down onto the other side without seeing anything of the night guards whose presence Wayne had dreaded. Half an hour more slid by as they descended steadily, without anything happening. The moon sank behind the mountain barrier on the west. In the east a rosy patch showed coming dawn.

As they neared the foot of the other side of the pass. Wayne could make out that the canyon opened into a valley too wide to see in the dim light. From down below came the vague murmurs and clatterings of a bedded herd.

Shortly, the strengthening light showed up a group of cabins scattered in a half circle around a small level clearing. Three of them were small and roughly put together. One other, larger and better built, stood some fifty yards or so further on. It was deathly still. Not a sound save Woods' steady undertone of gritting curses ruffled the hush of dawn.

The sun was just pushing into sight over the spruce tops, as Wayne pulled up with a muttered oath.

At first he had thought that the place was deserted—not a human being in sight. But now, through the pearly glow of the sunrise, he could see the figure of a man crouched low to the ground, gliding across

the open space toward the big cabin.

It was Will Foster.

"Get along down ahead, pronto, and don't wrangle no noise if yuh hanker to die natural," Wayne gritted in Woods' ear. "Shake uh leg, yuh louse—"

Sullenly Woods started ahead. Ten yards farther along onto the edge of the flat, Wayne jerked up stiff in his tracks and bit off a cry of dismay. With a shrieking of rusted hinges that ripped the silence into shreds, the door of the big cabin flew open. Lucy Hemenway's blue-eyed and golden-haired slim figure darted out and started running across the fifty yards to meet Foster.

A second behind her, a huge figure in scarlet silk shirt and leather breeches came hammering out through the doorway. One glance at the pock-scarred, sin-seamed face, convulsed with rage, and Wayne knew he was looking at Estaban Zorello, chief of the outlaw band.

In three jumps, Zorello caught up with the girl, gripped her by both arms from behind and dragged her back into the cabin.

FOSTER'S gun was out, but he held his fire. Obviously, he did not dare to shoot at Zorello from where he was for fear of hitting the girl. He started to run toward them.

The same instant, the doors of the three small cabins flew open. Out into the clearing half a dozen of the hardest looking characters that Wayne had ever laid eyes on came pouring in a wild stampede, guns glimmering in their hands.

Foster was now in the exact center of the clearing, with a cabin on either side of him. Three of the outlaws spotted him and blazed away.

The split-second before the shots rang out, Foster threw himself flat on the ground, firing as he moved. One of the Mexicans pitched up his arms, screeched, and went down on his face.

Wayne jerked his gun snout out of Woods' ribs and switched it around toward the two men on Foster's left. Before he could fire, a brace of orange flames drilled through the mist. Foster's gun dropped from his hand and he slumped limply face down on the grass.

Wayne jammed trigger and one of the cattle thieves went down.

In that same instant, Wayne hurled himself in a long flat dive onto the ground. The space of a heart-beat, and the crash of heavy-calibered guns throbbed deafening reverberations through the moist air. A knife-point of flame seared Wayne's shoulder. A blow like the jolt of a straight-arm blow crashed into his senses from somewhere and wilted the strength from his muscles.

Wayne swiveled his gaze up toward the house. With all that had happened, it had been a matter of twenty seconds or less since the door had opened and Lucy Hemenway had started to run out.

SHE was still fighting like a little wildcat in the big Mexican's grip. Suddenly she broke clear for an instant. Zorello snarled a curse and started to plunge after her.

Wayne bit his lip till the blood came to steady his reeling head and jammed trigger. Through the smoke-shot haze he saw a ragged, black-edged hole jump out against the Mexican's red silk shirt. Estaban Zorello screeched out an oath, spun half around and dropped to his knees. Swift as a cat, Lucy Hemenway whirled and ran back to him. Wayne saw her hand flash down to the holster swinging loose from his belt.

Over at Wayne's left, two guns crashed again. An agonizing pain shot through his chest. The figures of the three remaining outlaws started to jiggle around in a dizzying war dance.

Wayne drew a long breath and jammed trigger. One of the dodging forms went down. The others were scattering, firing as they zigzagged. Wayne fired again and missed. Once more desperately and missed again.

Wayne groaned. He had done his best and it was not enough. The odds were too big—

An oath whispered through Wayne's bleeding lips. Between the two outlaws, circling to get behind him, he saw Lucy Hemenway again. Steady as a rock, Estaban Zorello's long blue gun was anchored in her slim brown hand. The big revolver roared twice. The two running figures threw up their hands and crumpled up at the knees and pitched forward upon their faces.

WAYNE opened his eyes and looked around. He was lying on the ground under one of the trees. Foster and Lucy Hemenway were sitting beside him, sopping cold water onto his face.

"Where am I—did I get here in time?" Wayne muttered, half dazed. "Will—you all right?"

"All right is right," Foster's voice came back. "Yore some shot to pieces, Paul—a slug in the shoulder, one in the arm and one through the chest. Don't look to me like they're nothing to worry about though—nothing y'u won't get over all right when y'u've done saw a doc. Zorello is in bad shape with uh bullet in the lungs. He's agreed to confess the whole show, naming Tom and Fred Woods, if I'll agree not to prosecute him. Lucy slung a loop over Freddy when he done started to vamoose in the excitement and he's all roped and tied, ready to get toted back tuh jail."

Wayne shoved weakly up on an elbow.

"Yuh got one more prisoner here tuh wrangle back tuh yore lock-up. The way I'm sieve-salivated, I don't reckon I'll be no stampede uh trouble tuh ride herd on."

"Paul—for God's sake don't talk like uh damned idiot!" Foster cried hoarsely. "Y'u reckon I could arrest y'u now after y'u've done saved my life more times tonight than I can remember? Lucy and me been talkin' over what to do with y'u—"

"You can come back home with us, Paul," Lucy's voice spoke up. "Zorello's confession will say Tom Woods sent Vickers to kill you because you knew too much about his rustling and that you fired in self-defense. So even if Will does have to arrest you on his warrant, he'll turn right around and let you go again."

Wayne grinned and sighed.

Foster grinned back. He shoved out his hand. "Shake, deppity Wayne. I'm swearin' y'u in temporary till we get these miscreants rounded up behind bars. And I'll give y'u the job permanent if y'u'll promise me one thing—to stick around where Lucy and me kin see y'u once in uh while without havin' tuh ride clean tuh Mexico tuh do it. What say, y'u old stingin' lizard—want to work under me, huh?"

"God, do I want to!" Wayne cried, his eyes suddenly moist as he gripped Foster's fingers.

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The rope fell hissingly about her shoulders.

HELLFIRE HOMBRE

By TOM J. HOPKINS

The Lost Hills lobos plugged sheriffs for fun—until Deputy Riley Peake unkinked their curly tails with a new brand of gun-game.

ONLY two lighted buildings showed up in the tough little cowtown of Lost Hills, for it was late at night. One light was in "Gruber's Big Store," where a bald-headed little old man was preparing for bed. The other was in "Gruber's Big Corral," the one place of cheer—and trouble—for many

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miles around. It was in Hank Gruber's saloon and cunning brain that most of the crimes around Lost Hills which had worried honest people for many years were planned.

Behind the rude bar in the adobe saloon a jowl-faced bartender was serving Gruber's men. A half-dozen tough, hard-eyed men, seemingly cowboys, stood and drank with small pretense at talking. The impression they gave was of tense waiting, expectancy. At a small table, four more were playing stud poker. About the players was that same air of expectancy. All ten men, silent, watchful, evil-faced fellows, were waiting with impatience the coming of a certain rider, now days overdue.

At that very moment a man was coming into town, riding a big gray gelding. But it was not the man they expected, nor was the rider bringing them the news they awaited so anxiously.

What few words, what little movement there was in the saloon, stilled suddenly. A horse was trotting up outside, hoofs sounding plainly on the hard dirt. The horse stopped. The ten men turned steady, glinting eyes on the door. A moment of silence, then the clumping of high-heeled boots sounded.

The batwing doors swung open under the drive of broad, powerful shoulders. A half-sigh swept the group of watchful men as they stared silently at the newcomer. He paused, just inside the door, returning the stare, his dusty face twisting into a grin.

The ten men had expected to see a leather-clad young Mexican vaquero who habitually wore a bright scarlet sombrero. Instead, they saw a bowlegged, burly American cowboy dressed in flannel shirt, heavy woolen pants, and flat-brimmed Stetson; all of the same light shade of gray and brand new. Pinned to the left pocket of the shirt was a bright new peace officer's star, and all eyes fixed on that, automatically.

Just two things showed to tell the shrewd observer that while the outfit was new, the wearer was anything but a tenderfoot. One was a well-greased holster, slung low on the thick thigh of the man, the other a well-worn gun-butt protruding from it.

RILEY PEAKE grinned cheerily at the silent, unwelcoming group. In turn they stared, somber-eyed, at his bland smile and guileless face. It was just the sort of reception the sheriff had warned Peake he would get, before sending him there on his first job as a peace officer. Tough country, tough men, and still tougher to make them even pretend to obey the law. More than one hard-fighting deputy had given up Lost Hills as a bad job. Riley Peake had agreed to tackle it by way of proving his worth.

"Howdy, gents!" Peake spoke cheerily. "Sheriff says as how it's about time a big town like Lost Hills has a deputy all to its lonesome. That's me! It bein' my first job, I'm hopin' you won't make it too tough on me."

He smiled broadly as he spoke.

Peake had planned the thing in advance and decided that trying to make friends would be the first move. If that did not succeed, other means, with which the cowboy was quite familiar, could be tried. As he studied the men, to see how his words would be taken, he caught a swift shifting of eyes to one man. That man, a lanky, gray-bearded fellow who was a little better dressed than the others, was Hank Gruber himself.

"Howdy, Lawman," Gruber laughed softly, his beard parting to show yellowed teeth. "Glad to see you. But I'm warnin' you: don't try to put too many of us in jail right away."

Riley Peake joined good-natured in the laugh that followed.

"This here calls for liquor," Gruber said. "Set 'em up, Dutch. Come on, boys, meet the lawman!"

Gruber turned back to Peake and stuck out a long, gangling arm which ended in a huge, ham-like hand. Riley Peake stepped forward, sticking out his hand to meet that huge paw of Gruber's. Then, with startling speed, things began to happen.

The huge hand crushed down on Peake's smaller one, closing like a bear trap. He writhed, almost screaming with sudden pain, helpless in that terrible grip. He tried to jerk free, found he could not. Gruber, his bearded face grinning maliciously, pulled the twisting Peake closer to him. A half-dozen men closed in suddenly. Peake felt a hand jerk his gun

from the holster, heard it clatter on the floor. Someone struck at him viciously. The blow, and his own struggles, freed him from the numbing grip of Gruber's great hand. Then he began to fight like a cornered wildcat.

"Don't kill him," Gruber's voice rang out. "Just teach him we can run this town ourselves!"

IT was a swift and vicious melee while it lasted. Riley Peake, even with seven men piling all over him, was a hard fighter. He ducked and dodged and shot hammer-like blows in every direction. But it couldn't last, one against seven. He was being steadily battered into a daze. All he knew was to throw fists at every blurring face he saw. Then, a great hand balled into a knot crashed down on the back of Peake's neck. A foul, vicious blow that paralyzed every nerve and muscle in his body. His brain seemed to snap, then everything turned black about him.

It was then that Gruber stopped his men:

"No use killin' him," he snapped out roughly. "That'll bring not only more deputies, but rangers, too! Tie him on his horse an' send him home, then maybe they'll get the idea and let us alone over here."

Under his orders the men picked up the limp, unconscious deputy and carried him out to his horse. Some tied him in the saddle while others stripped his gun, belt, and saddlebags of all ammunition. Then, slapping the big gray gelding, they watched the horse trot off.

Gruber chuckled a little as they all followed him back into the saloon. Inside, he wiped some of Peake's blood from his paw-like hand, and treated himself to another drink. Then: "I don't know how much longer we kin get away with this," he said. "But we'll sure as hell keep doin' it while we kin!"

The men laughed thinly. He was their leader, and being with him paid them well. They were satisfied.

Twenty minutes later a horse stopped near the rear door of Gruber's saloon, and the rider dismounted swiftly. The waiting men turned as he entered, saw the familiar leather-clad figure with the crimson sombrero for whom they waited. Gruber stared for a moment at the singularly youthful, handsome face almost concealed under the wide-brimmed sombrero, then spoke curtly.

"Where the hell you been, Raul?" he demanded. "An' what's the word?"

"I could not get away sooner," the Mexican spoke in a voice hoarsened by fatigue, dust. "Two hundred head of fine horses, six men. They will camp at Los Tecolotes tomorrow night! Now, *adios*, I must get back!"

He waved a slim, dark hand in a gesture of farewell, wheeled, and disappeared. Gruber's eyes glowed as he turned to the others. All had heard. They grinned at each other, for the news was good, meant much ill-gotten gain. Outside, the clatter of hoofs sounded, died away.

"Come on, boys!" said Gruber, turning back to the bar. "Let's drink—to tomorrow night an' two hundred head o' fine horses Bud Walton is goin' to lose!"

RILEY PEAKE'S gelding carried him straight back along the trail to the county seat, one hundred miles away. But the new deputy had a harder head, stronger brain, than the Lost Hills gang realized. In twenty minutes he was straightening in the saddle and wincing a little with pain. Then, with a quick word of command, the gelding halted. It took Peake ten minutes to free his hands and feet from the ropes and to discover he had no cartridges. He grinned a little thinly as he rolled a smoke, then stopped with narrowing gaze, the match unlighted in his fingers.

The click of shod hoofs in a stream bed several hundred yards away sent Peake's hand down to his gun. With the move came recollection that his shells had been taken from him. He dropped the unlighted smoke, led the gelding into the shadow of a nearby tree, and took his lass-rope from the saddle.

Whoever was following him from Lost Hills, whatever his business might be, he was due to get a surprise in scant seconds. Peake had time to hope that the fellow used the same size gun, for cartridges would come in handy at the moment. Then his rope was snaking out as though with eyes of its own.

As he made the swift cast from the ground, Peake caught a quick picture of a Mexican vaquero, riding along the trail. Then the deputy set himself back on his heels, for the coming shock. The loop had settled neatly over the rider's shoulders. A shrill, startled yell came, then the horse bolted, to race off and disappear into the night. The rider, helpless with surprise and the tightening noose, was jerked from the saddle and hit the ground heavily.

Cat-like leaps carried Riley Peake up the rope before the rider could move.

"Knocked cold," he grunted as he leaned over the limp huddle. He jerked out the holstered gun and rolled the rider over. "Probably got a knife hidden, like all Mex— Hell! It's a girl!"

The heavily embroidered crimson sombrero had fallen off, showing a thick knot of dark hair. The hair framed a face of real beauty. Even the closed eyes and an ugly bruise with a trickle of blood from it could not conceal that. For a moment the startled deputy stared down at the pretty face with its closed eyes, his own popping in amazement. Then, dropping the gun he had taken from her, he came to life with a quick jerk. As he stooped over her, the girl's lips parted and she moaned.

"Gruber—horses—tomorrow—Los Tecolotes—"

The moaning words meant nothing to the deputy. He jerked out his handkerchief and gently wiped at the blood on the smooth forehead. As he did so, his surprise and bewilderment became even greater. For in wiping off the blood, he had also wiped off some dark stain, leaving a streak of pure white skin showing.

"Now what?" Peake growled to himself. "Ain't a Mex. Ain't a man. Girl. American. . . ."

Peake stared down, intently, at the face. The moonlight was enough to outline her features clearly, and he found something hauntingly familiar about them. For a moment he could not recall it, then it came. The girl, even disguised as she was, was the one he had seen at an isolated line camp earlier in his ride to Lost Hills. Instead of being made welcome, as was the custom of the range, she had invited him to ride on, in decidedly curt words. Peake had ridden on, and puzzled. Now, he decided, he had the answer. It seemed as if everybody in that end of the county was in league with Gruber.

Deciding that the girl was not coming to life without some aid, Peake turned and dog-trotted back to the creek for water. The return trip, with his sombrero almost brimming, was made slowly. Puffing a little from the trip up and down the slope, Peake came back and stopped, swearing explosively.

The girl was gone. With her had gone her gun, and Riley Peake's most cherished possession—the well-trained gelding!

IT was just an hour later when Riley Peake stood in the shadows beside Gruber's store building. He was no longer the grinning, good-natured fellow who had ridden into Lost Hills earlier in the evening. He was hard-eyed. His jaw stuck out at a pugnacious angle. From the beating he had received Peake was quite certain that discovery of his return would mean trouble, possibly death, at the hands of Gruber and his tough, outlaw crew. But that realization was not going to stop Riley Peake. The sheriff had said that end of the county needed a law-bringing deputy. Well, like it or not, they most certainly had one!

Cartridges for his gun had seemed the most important thing, and Gruber's store the easiest place to get them. Peake drew a knife, deftly pried back the latch of a window above him, then crawled up and inside the dark, barn-like interior. There he paused a moment, as his eyes focused to the surrounding darkness. About ten feet from him were racks of rifles and shotguns, with many boxes of cartridges below. Soundless as a cat, Riley Peake strode toward the badly wanted ammunition. As he did so, a dim figure rose from behind a counter, unseen by the deputy and just back of him. A click came, then a blinding flare of light from a suddenly opened bull's-eye lantern.

"Hands up, an' turn slow!" said the dim figure in a rather squeaky voice. "I got a scatter-gun on you, an' I'm so old my fingers wiggle pretty easy."

Caught by surprise, without a single cartridge in his gun or belt, Riley Peake

did exactly as ordered. All he could see as he turned around was the shaft of light from the lantern. Into the beam of light projected the ugly black muzzle of a shotgun. It was aimed straight at the light-gray-clad figure of the young deputy sheriff, potential death.

But before he had time to wonder what to do or say, a low, wailing moan of terror came from behind the lantern. The moan took shape into words.

"*Jim Peake*—come back for me!"

The lantern crashed to the floor and went out. The gun followed it. Peake, blinded momentarily by the shift from light to dark, heard the man take several stumbling steps, then fall.

For at least five seconds Riley Peake stood without moving. His eyes struggled to focus to the sudden darkness, but through his bewildered brain flashed a swift picture: his mother, white-faced, holding him in her arms as they stared down at the body of a murdered rancher. About them, a half-dozen grim-lipped, helpless-looking cowboys who had known and loved the murdered man. That man was Riley Peake's father, Jim Peake, to whom he bore a striking resemblance.

As Peake's eyes at last focused to the light, he saw a shivering, whimpering old man huddled down on his knees by the window. Three quick strides carried the deputy to the old man. A tragic face of terror stared up at Peake, strangely ghost-like in the moonlight.

He could not place the old man.

"Jim! Jim!" came a low, wailing cry of terror, almost madness. "I didn't kill you, Jim! It was Bear Paw!"

Riley Peake leaned over, his hand clutching the trembling shoulder in a tight grip.

"Who are you?" he started to say, then stopped short.

At Peake's grip, a queer, shivering tremble went over the crouching old man. His head snapped down suddenly onto his chest, hung limp, twisted. Peake stared down, almost dully, for a moment, then straightened up. Questions could not be answered, now, for in sheer terror, the old man's heart had stopped. He was dead.

THE first thing Peake did after realizing the old man was dead, was to stride swiftly over to the shelves and help himself to cartridges. As he swiftly loaded his gun, filled his belt-loops, his mind was seething.

The sheriff had told Peake of Lost Hill's history and evil reputation before sending him there. Once a stage station, when the railroad had been built a hundred miles to the north the place had been abandoned. Then, Gruber had appeared from nowhere and bought the buildings. He had made it his headquarters for a cattle outfit, opened the store and saloon and done a general business with the scattered neighboring outfits. The town was not far from a trail into Mexico. Passing herds and ore-trains often sent men over for provisions, which also meant drinking and gambling. A wild, isolated spot, robbery and murder became common things—but hard to prove on anyone.

All told, Lost Hills had a mighty tough reputation for a place so small. Only a half-dozen Mexican families lived there, with about thirty men who all worked for Hank Gruber. Everything seemed Gruber to the angry, bewildered deputy. Even the very cartridges he was taking to replace those lost in the fight were Gruber's.

At thoughts of the fight in the saloon Peake suddenly stiffened, his face going into a mask-like expression. Memory came of that vise-like grip, the tremendous hands of Gruber. The words of the fear-stricken old man rang again. "It was Bear Paw!"

Was Gruber, leader of this outlaw crew, the murderer of Peake's father? If so, why had he not recognized the young deputy from his startling resemblance, as had the old man? Perhaps because he had not known the murdered rancher, perhaps because he was not the man known as Bear Paw.

For twenty years Riley Peake had dreamed of some day killing his father's unknown murderer. Yet in all those years never before had he come across the slightest clue. Now, even though the old man was dead, Peake at least had something to go on. One sure way to

find out, it seemed, was to go straight to Gruber and accuse him of the crime. Peake felt certain he could read the truth from the eyes of a startled man. Then, blazing guns—death for the murderer of his father, and perhaps death for Riley Peake at the hands of Gruber's men. Well, it would be worth it!

Swinging out of the window, Peake dropped to the ground. A swift look showed the place still deserted, for the hour was late. Only one light now in the scattered buildings, that of the saloon. Taking advantage of every shadow, Peake worked his way to the rear of the building, close to the door. The jowl-faced bartender and one other man were closing the place for the night. Where Gruber slept was impossible to tell, of course, without aid. Peake hesitated a moment. Should he try to capture one or both of these men to get the information from them?

A mumble of voices came from the two inside. Peake heard something about, "Tomorrow night—two hundred head—good haul—"

Into the deputy's mind came memory of the mysterious girl's words, to the same import. Something up, here. Something crooked planned for the following night. It was Peake's sworn duty as a peace officer to take a hand, prevent it if he could. His own revenge and plans must wait. Hard to forego, that scene with Gruber, but necessary.

EVEN as the thought came to Riley Peake, the door popped wide open and the two men came out. Both stumbled over the deputy's crouching figure. That was followed by a startled cry, then a wild flurry of arms and legs as Peake came up fighting. Here, at last, was something to vent his rage on.

Peake went at the two surprised men like a wildcat. Hammering, dazing blows, thrown with all his strength and accumulated fury, drove the men staggering. Cursing, they fought to keep him off, to draw their guns.

Peake was going too fast, however, too strong for them. As one of his terrific punches landed, he felt teeth give way in the face he hit. The fat bartender went down in a moaning heap, hands to his bleeding face. The other man side-stepped, jerked his hand free and downward. Peake caught the blurr of a rising weapon. He jumped back, jerked his own gun out with the same move. The two guns roared as one.

Peake felt a tugging jerk at his sombrero, and knew death had passed close—but passed. His face stung for an instant with the flare of the shot, his eyes blinded by the flash. He saw the man curling, falling to the ground.

From a building a hundred feet away came a startled yell. Two men appeared suddenly, guns in hand. More, half awake, came popping out of other buildings. Guns began to explode as all saw Peake on the dead run for the sheltering willows in the nearby stream bed. It was fifty yards to go, and in bright moonlight. Lead was whining a singing tune of death about Peake as he ran. Dust kicked up in odd little bursts around his flying feet. But he made it.

Once in the shadows, Peale wheeled swiftly. He saw four of the more courageous men coming his way on the dead run, shooting as they came. With a grim line about his mouth, Peake leveled his gun and fired carefully, though rapidly. Two of the men went down, then another. The third dropped flat, still shooting.

Well back among the buildings more men were coming, but they took shelter swiftly as Peake reloaded, sprayed them with lead. A vicious return fire began. Peake raced off into the sheltering trees, reloading his gun.

His brain going faster than his flying feet, Peake did not fire another shot. Quick thinking told him Gruber would send his men scouring the whole country to locate him. The natural thought, for them, was that he had a horse, would flee at once. Peake was gambling his life on that idea. He circled through the trees, and headed back toward the town. In a few moments, while the shooting was still going on, he was near the scattered buildings again. The closest of them was a big hay barn, adjoining the corrals. At the darkest spot at the tree line, Peake flattened down and waited.

In two minutes Gruber had most of his men in the saddle. A moment later, and they were racing off into the night,

to try and find their mysterious visitor.

Grinning to himself at thoughts of their vain chase, Peake waited for a time. Soon he was certain the barn and nearby buildings were deserted. He made his way, swiftly, to the barn and climbed the sloping surface of the hay. At the top he burrowed deep into the loose-piled stuff. Then he settled down for a long wait, quite content to be back in Lost Hills, ready to mix into whatever deviltry Gruber might be planning for the following night.

TOWARD morning Gruber and his men came back, swearing their disappointment. Hidden in the hay, Peake caught enough talk to tell him they did not suspect him, but some cowboy or prospector who had been robbed in their dangerous haunts. The riders put up their horses, left, still growling.

The day passed slowly. At sunset a dozen men appeared, took fresh horses, and rode away. Peake, peering through the loose hay, could see that all were heavily armed with both pistols and rifles. Evidently, something was up, for that night. Wriggling with impatience, Peake realized he must wait for dark before making a move. Then, perhaps, he could find some way of mixing into Gruber's schemes—to Gruber's loss.

Darkness came with maddening slowness, but came at last. The barn and corrals were deserted when Peake at last rose from the hay and started down the slippery surface to the dirt floor of the building. Then came the clatter of hoofs, excited words, from a nearby abode hut. Gruber's voice rose, sharp, menacing, flinging questions.

Peake crept to the wall of the barn, hand on gun. Peering through a crack, he saw a half-dozen or more men grouped about two people on horses. In broken English with a marked Mexican accent, came excited words.

"That devil, Bud Walton, he get what you call wise! Me, they take for prisoner. This girl, she's dress in my clothes. It was she who come to you las' night, not me, Raul. These things is trap, Senor Gruber! They make for you send men away, to get killed! Those cowboys are mad—they make for kill us all! Me, I get away, capture this girl who was guarding me, an' now I am here! Maybe you make her talk. Maybe she tell something."

"I won't!" came a crisp, firm answer in a girl's voice.

Gruber bellowed a threat. Again came the cool, firm voice.

"I risked my life to trick you. I won't spoil it by talking now."

A hoarse, threatening roar of rage came from the men. The girl kept silent, despite all. Peake felt a tremendous surge of admiration for her courage in facing that murderous crew, not only now, but earlier in the evening. It took more bravery than most men had to do a thing of that sort. He wondered that the men had allowed her to do it. Later he learned she was the only person small enough to wear Raul's clothes.

"Porky, Texas, put her in my house," came Gruber's harsh order. "We'll tend to her later. The rest o' you tell everybody to come to the saloon. We gotta figure this deal out, some way."

PORKY and Texas took the girl into the nearest adobe hut, not fifty yards away. Gruber and the others ran swiftly down the dark street, calling orders as they went.

Peake counted about fifteen men coming out of the huts and hurrying toward the saloon. Some had already reached the building, others were still scattered along the street when a sudden, stabbing flash of light appeared at the tree line near the saloon. Mingling with the roar of that single rifle shot, came the high-pitched scream of some man's death cry. Then, like the sudden bursting of a mountain thunderstorm, from many places about the town came the roar of many rifles, a hail of leaden death.

Riley Peake barely smothered a loud, exultant yelp. He knew instantly the sudden burst of shooting was part of the trap laid by the mysterious girl and her allied. It was a well-planned clean-up to rid that part of the country of Gruber and his band. He grinned a little at the shrewdness of splitting Gruber's band, to meet death in separate places. Then the grin faded, as two quick thoughts came.

One was of the girl, trapped by

Gruber's men, sure to suffer if left there unaided. The other was his own predicament. He was utterly unknown to the death-dealing, vengeful cowboys so determined to kill Gruber and all his men. They, as would Gruber's crowd, most certainly would shoot Riley Peake on sight. Even knowing this, the deputy was in no mood to get out of the thing. He was going to help the girl, first, then—Gruber!

A quick glance assured Peake there were no horses in the hay barn. He touched a match to the dry hay, wheeled, and sprinted swiftly out of the barn. Straight across the open space he went, yelling as he neared the building.

"Porky! Texas! Le' me in!"

The two guards left with the girl, bewildered by the sudden outburst of shooting, had no time to think or recognize the man racing toward them. They yanked open the door and stood aside for Peake's flying entry. Once inside, Peake sent one glance at the girl. She was safely out of line of bullets, which were about to fly. He wheeled on the two men, his star glinting in the now rising flames of the burning hay.

"See my star?" Peake growled at them. "See if you two coyotes can hit it—now!"

BOTH men, after a startled glance, jerked their guns upward. But Peake was ready, in a fighting humor. He shot first—and faster. His gun roared three times, so rapidly that the echoes in the little room made it one sound. He felt a sharp, stinging tug at his left arm, then saw both men go down. The girl cried out. Peake gave the two outlaws a swift look, saw they were definitely out of the fight. Then he turned to the girl.

"I'm a deputy, here to get Gruber," he spoke, grinning as a thought came to him, and he recognized the girl at once. "I'm the fellow you wouldn't let come to your line camp the other day. The fellow who yanked you off your horse that night. I thought you was one o' Gruber's men."

Peake laughed softly at her bewildered expression. He was reloading his gun swiftly, and went on.

"Keep down out o' sight, and away from bullets. That fire lights this end o' town up so's none o' Gruber's men'll come this way. I think you'll be safe—and I'm on my way!"

"Wait!" the girl called suddenly. "The boys don't know you. They'll kill you."

Peake only laughed. His mind was on Gruber, and nothing was to intervene between them, and a final reckoning. If Gruber really had murdered the deputy's father, Peake wanted no gun but his own to end the man's life. He ducked out the door into the glare of the burning hay, ran around the hut into the shadows on the far side, and there paused.

The town was a bedlam of yelling, swearing, fighting men. Some of Gruber's men were in the saloon, making a good battle of it. Others, trapped in buildings before they could join the rest, were being shot out by the deadly fire of the vengeful cowboys.

The outlaw band was cornered, knew it. Death by bullet or noose waited them, but they were going to take as many with them as they could. Mingling with the wild uproar of the fighting men came the steady crackling of the flames, shedding a red glare over the whole scene now. It was a fitting end to the outlaw band, but where was Gruber, himself?

Peake took one step out of the shadows. As he did so, lead thudded into the wall near him. He threw his hands high, as though shot, and dropped flat. A quick scramble carried him back into the shadows, and no more bullets came his way. Evidently, one step into the light meant almost certain death.

Finding Gruber seemed a forlorn hope, in the crazed battle going on. The man would probably get killed, but Peake was more than anxious to do the killing himself. Peake stared helplessly at the fighting men. The cowboys, some mounted, some on foot, were riding closer to the saloon, throwing lead as rapidly as they could reload and pull triggers. It was nearing the finish.

It couldn't last much longer.

Steadily the long, fighting line of cowboys worked their way past the adobes toward the saloon. There the last of Gruber's men were cornered, fighting in desperation to kill as many as they could before they were shot down. Peake rose, then, determined to make a try at getting

with the cowboys. He could show them his star, before they shot him as one of Gruber's men—perhaps. At least it would be worth the gamble. Riley Peake took one step forward, and stopped.

A LONG-LEGGED, wildly running man was coming out of one of the huts. Evidently, the fellow had played dead until the cowboys had passed, was now trying to escape. Peake raised his gun, then lowered it. He stepped back into the shadows and waited. For the glare of the flames showed the man, coming straight toward the hut, to be Gruber.

Gruber, half-frantic with rage, had almost reached the hut when Peake's cold voice stopped him:

"Bear Paw!"

Gun ready for a death shot, Peake waited for an answer. If Gruber was the murderer of his father, he would answer to that old nickname, voiced by someone he could not recognize there in the shadows. Gruber stopped short, peered into the darkness. He had come there either to take the girl away as hostage, or kill her. Now, half-crazed with the slaughter of his band, his own danger, he blinked queerly into the shadows and said, curtly: "Yeah? Who're you?"

"I'm the deputy you ran out o' town. An' I'm Jim Peake's son, Gruber!"

Memories passed through Hank Gruber's evil brain in the fraction of a second, as the deadly old outlaw raised his guns. All about him sounded the grim roll of rifles, telling the end of a vicious outlaw band. Then Gruber's guns came up. A light glowed in his eyes. Only this one man stood between him and safety.

Both men exploded every shot in their guns, as rapidly as they could. No time, no need for real aim at the short distance—just lead, and lots of it. Riley Peake was grinning, as he stood up under the impact of bullets from Gruber's guns. From Gruber's answer to the nickname, he knew the man was the murderer of his father. Knew that even though he himself died, Gruber would go with him, his father's death avenged.

Gruber was staggering backward, away from the reeling Peake. The deputy tried to raise his gun, found himself too weak to do it. He groaned helplessly, then laughed a queer, grating laugh. Gruber was going backwards, all right, but his gaunt, bearded face was already turned up to the sky he would never see again. As Gruber fell, Peake slumped down, also. Darkness settled over Riley Peake, but his last emotion was that of satisfaction.

IT was broad daylight when Riley Peake came to life. He found himself in Gruber's bed, well-bandaged, and not suffering a great deal of pain. Facing him was Bud Walton's sister, looking even prettier than he had remembered her. Walton, a level-eyed, square-shouldered cowman of the type Peake had known all his life, was grinning down at him.

"Man, you're sure hard to kill," Walton chuckled. "You done your talkin' while you were out o' your head, which included tellin' my sister how game she was, an' how sorry you are about that egg you bumped onto her head. So, I reckon I'll just tell you we cleaned up on both crowds. There ain't a man o' that Gruber outfit that ain't in hell—where he belongs. So, barrin' a few Mexicans who weren't in on those deals, there's no prisoners for you to take back to the county seat."

Riley Peake nodded. That was satisfactory to him. His gaze shifted to Jane Walton's pretty face.

"Gosh, ma'am," he blurted out. "I'm sure sorry about that lump—"

Jane Walton, pretty as she was, surveyed him with a severe expression.

"It's going to take a whole lot of apologies to square that trick!" she said. Then, her lips twitching a little, her eyes dancing merrily, she went on. "So, I think you better come to our ranch while you're getting over those wounds. That will give you plenty of time to hear my opinion of any man who would treat a girl that way!"

Riley Peake blinked a little. A slow, quizzical grin came over his face as he looked at her.

"Ma'am he said, "I gotta hunch I'll be tryin' to explain that bump for the rest o' my life!"

And he was right!

The Yaquis charged up the hill . . . a yelling, shrieking, marijuana-crazed rabble

PAYOFF IN MEX

By WALT COBURN

WHEN, or when ain't a man got nerve? Gimme a answer tuh that an' I'll th'ow in with yuh, stranger. I'm sixty-three, come July, er mebby it's August, danged if I recollect, off-hand. I punched cows since I was hock high to a horned toad, seen a heap uh human stock durin' them years that's

A hundred a month and cartridges free! The Circle-C hired 'em rough, tough and nasty, for in that God-forgotten strip below the Rio the deck was stacked and the take was Death.

bin spent here and there between the Canady line an' the Rio, an' I'll tell a man I've looked on some shore odd specimens uh nerve.

Take Bogus Lang, him as'd forked hosses most bronk peelers wouldn't go into the same corral with. I seen a speckled-faced kid run Bogus outa camp with a empty gun.

An' there was Whitey, who fit the three Jackson boys at Laramie. Single-handed, his hide punctured in so many places he looked like a sponge when we buried him, he shot it out with them

three gun toters an' killed all three afore he laid down fer keeps there in the street an' swaps his six-gun fer a pretty gold harp.

Yet I seen this same Whitey, not more'n three months afore that when he was nighthawkin' fer the Turkey Track, give up head like a roped yearlin' when a pack rat run acrost his sleepin' tarp.

Nerve? Jest what is it, anyhow, and who's a fit gent tuh qualify fer judgin' if a man's got it er ain't he? Me, I dunno. An' jest tuh prove my ignerance on the aforesaid subject, lemme spill yuh a windy concernin' one Jess Hardy and the boy we calls Adobe Smith that tooken place shortly after the World War—the first one, I mean.

I'm jiggerin' a cow spread on the off side uh what we calls the International Border separatin' the United States an' Texas from that strip uh Mexico where Pancho Villa usta ride. Meanin' Chihuahua, where any trouble-huntin' gent of any size, color, er nationality kin git a belly full uh scrappin' fer the askin' er sometimes without even biddin' fer it.

My outfit is payin' a hunderd a month, grub an' ca'tridges, fer top cow hands tuh he'p gather slick-ear cattle acrost the border. Our owners, bein' a combine uh American an' Mexicans that's bin run outa their ranches acrost yonder, pays top wages but no ransom money. Onct we're acrost the border, we're standin' on nothin' but our own two laigs, trustin' to luck, our guns, an' the Señor Dios.

It's a pack spread, the country bein' too rough tuh run a wagon. Our grub ain't noways fancy, fer we aims tuh travel fast an' light at times. But Nigger Bob, who stands six foot two in his bare feet, claims a personal record uh twenty-three greasers, an' kin shoe the oneriest mule in the outfit without tyin' a foot up on 'im, kin sling some shore appetizin' meals from frijole beanses, beef, an' flour. An' his coffee has whiskers.

Pelon, the hoss jingler, is part Yaqui, part Mex, an' all devil, an' has a sweet habit uh scalpin' his victims. It's a toss-up which he hates most, his mother's side, the Yaquis, er his ol' man's Mexican folks. But he's the best hoss wrangler I ever laid eyes on.

There's three-four Mormon boys from Arizona, some long-geared Texicans that kin make a hand in any man's country, Jess Hardy, an' the boy we calls 'Dobe Smith.

From foretop tuh hocks, they're as fast a crew as a boss cud ask fer. I mighta hand picked the State uh Texas an' done no better. When we've rid off the effects uh the last drink we had taken at the Yellow Kid in Juarez, when Nigger Bob's got his kitchen mules strung out in the dust kicked up by Pelon's remuda, I rolls me a smoke an' tells myse'f that I'm roddin' a spread that kin give half uh Mexico cards an' spades, then lick 'em with a barlow knife.

BUT that was afore I'd met up with El Toro—an' his bunch uh marijuana-doped renegades. I'd heered rumors about this Señor El Toro, The Bull. But I never took no stock in 'em. Since Villa had laid down his hand an' let Chihuahua git a night's sleep, there'd bin a dozen er more mescal drunk, four-flushin' gents that's tried tuh build a bad rep. But they all gits picked up by a rurale er two, their paddle-footed army scattered like quail, an' gits stood up ag'in' o 'dobe wall while some bum shots pecks away at 'em until death do thee part. We've had a half dozen "Butchers," "Bulls," an' a "Eagle" er two th'owed in fer good measure. The jefe, who is a kinda cross between a state senator, general, an' Rooshian king, is tryin' tuh make suthin' outa his state uh Chihuahua an' does his dangdest tuh cut down the two-bit tequilla generals that start a revolution every time they take on too much bad licker. The rurales is plumb hard on rebels an' there's more than some uh these chili-eatin' generals as never lives long enough tuh ever stand trial.

But somehow or other in the shuffle, this El Toro builds hiss'f a marijuana army back in the hills where us boys is bound fer. Somewheres in the rough country, they 'stills their own tequilla, grows

their own hop, an' eats plumb maverick beef.

Now, if I'd took much notice tuh what I'd heered in El Paso an' Juarez, concernin' El Toro, I'd uh took more men. But I'd never met up with Mister Toro ner had Nigger Bob ner Pelon ner the others. That is, except Jess Hardy who I ain't got tuh know much yet.

This Jess Hardy feller, when he tackles me fer a job at the Paso del Norte Hotel in El Paso, is wearin' of soldier clothes. A big, grinnin' young feller who 'lows he's jest outa the army, havin' bin acrost in France fer a spell, dealin' out hell to the German warriors. He's bin a sergeant an' has papers tuh prove it. Acrost his chest is some medals fer bein' a fightin' fool. He's jest off a jamboree in Juarez, busted flat, an' rearin' tuh work.

"I'm a five-minute egg," says he, "If I can't outride, outfight, outdrink, outcuss, an' outshoot any man in yore outfit, I'll work fer nothin'."

"Got a outfit?" says I, not exactly likin' his braggin'.

"I'll have one by the time I show up. Advance me jest one dollar." An' he brings out a pair uh dice. "These babies will buy papa his outfit."

Which they shore does, I reckon, fer when he shows up fer work, he's draggin' along a silver-mounted saddle an' bridle that's worth five hundred dollars if it's worth a cent. Likewise he's wearin' shop boots an' overalls an' a beaver hat like show cowboys wears.

"Had hell findin' some hombre that wore the same size hat an' boots as me, Cap," he grins. "But I finally managed to cut the mustard. Let's take on a light 'un."

An' he pulls out a roll that'd choke a cow. I reckon my eyes musta bin boogerin' outa my head, fer he laughs plenty. Then he points out a sad lookin' jasper settin' at a empty poker table in his sock feet an' no hat. Jess holds out a couple uh twenties, then walkin' over to the gent, shoves him the roll uh dough.

"This'll buy yuh a better layout than yuh had, buddy," he grins. "Don't never gamble no more with strangers. You bin playin' Africy golf with the best little New Orleans domino player in the A. E. F."

"A man that kin make a livin' like that," says I, when me an' Jess is splittin' a bottle uh wine, "ain't got no business whatever punchin' cows in Chihuahua."

"Cap," says he, an' while he's grinnin', his grey eyes is cold as ice, "I got my reasons fer signin' up fer a hitch with yore spread. Nuf said, eh, compadre?"

"Make it easy on yourese'f, son," I tells him, beginnin' tuh like the dang young hellion fer all his loud-mouthed braggin'.

IT'S about then that I notices a short complexioned feller with faded blue eyes that's the same color as his wore out jumper an' overalls. He's standin' at the bar on my right, fondlin' of a glass uh the Yellow Kid's worst and powerfullest licker.

"Are you Buck Bell?" he asks in a soft, slow voice, "the boss uh the spread that's workin' acrost the Palomas country?"

"I am," I admits. "Lookin' fer a punchin' job?"

"I'd like tuh take a little whirl at it," says he.

"Know what yo're up ag'in'?" questions him, not wantin' some dang pilgrim along.

"I reckon I do, Bell." He smiles a little but I kin see with one eye that he ain't recallin' nothin' comical when he does it.

"I bin all over Chichuahua," he goes on.

"It was Pelon as told me you was lookin' fer cow hands."

"Yuh know Pelon?" I asks kinda surprised.

"Yes," says he, an' I somehow git the idee that he don't want tuh be asked too many questions.

"Yo're hired," I tells him. "What's yore handle?"

"Call me Smith." He's lookin' out the doorway toward the adobe wall at the cuartel. "'Dobe Smith," he smiles again, like a joke's bin played on him.

Well 'Dobe an' Jess shakes hands an' the rest uh the boys who has bin he'pin' Nigger Bob load the grub an' git strung out, drifts in. We has a few rounds

uv drinks, picks up Pelon an' the remuda, and' goes yonderly.

Ridin' along the trail, we don't do much augerin'. The Texas boys kinda herds tuh theirselves, likewise the Mormon punchers. Which leaves me an Jess an' 'Dobe together.

Jess does enough talkin' fer the three of us while me an' 'Dobe holds up the listenin' end. Most uh Jess's talkin' concerns hisself. Bad hosses he's rid, men he's whupped, an'-so on. Then he starts fightin' over the war onct more from the day he goes in till Armistice Day. Girls he met in Paris, cognac he's drunk, M.P.'s he's licked, an' how he gits decorated by ya Frog general. All the while me an' 'Dobe listens.

"What outfit was you in, buddy?" he asks 'Dobe.

'Dobe kinda pauses a second afore he answers. Jess, bein' purty well drunk, don't notice like I does. Then comes 'Dobe's soft answer.

"The Ninety-first Division."

But when Jess tries tuh drag him back into the trenches, 'Dobe bogs down on him an' talks cows. Which should uh bin a big enough hint that so far as 'Dobe Smith was concerned, the war was over.

Jess declares war onct more an' brags a plenty about Sergeant Jess Hardy.

"What outfit was you in, Pecos?" he asks a long-built Texas boy.

"Air Service," 'lows Pecos.

"Flyin'?"

"Yeah. Plenty," Pecos tells him. "Flyin' aroun' the mess hall waitin' on table. When the personnel officer asks me what kin I do, I tells him I kin ride a hoss. So he puts me on K. P. an' there I stays. I was one uh the heroes uh the battle uh Kelly Field, Texas. That there war I heered was goin' on somewheres was shore a disappointment tuh me."

"An' me," adds a boy from Dallas. "I'd never got enough dough in my jeans tuh git outa my home state. Figgered I'd git sent as fur as Noo York, anyhow. I goes into the cavalry. Does I git outa Texas? I does not. An' all the hoss I sees is a wooden carpenter's hoss. I built a heap uh barracks durin' the war."

Well it turns out that two uh the Mormon boys had bin in the navy. Gits as far as San Diego. Jess an' 'Dobe is all that's seen overseas service. Which swells Jess's head all the bigger but 'Dobe don't say much. Jest listens.

It's then I sees that 'Dobe is eatin' up every word Jess let go of. Dang me fer a sheepherder if he ain't listenin' with both eyes an' ears. He's still listenin' an' Jess is still talkin' when the rest of us beds down.

I drops off tuh sleep with words like Mons an' bo-coo an' Chateau Thiery an' francs an' sech furrin' soundin' names comin' in a steady stream. An' the last thing I sees is 'Dobe shovin' sticks on the fire, starin' into the flickerin' blaze, his eyes sad an' broodin'-like.

As we ain't begun gatherin' cattle yet, us boys takes turn about standin' night guard on the hosses. Each feller standin' a two-hour watch. The night is split into four guards, two men on each watch, an' as there's ten of us, not countin' Nigger Bob an' Pelon which neither of 'em don't stand guard, it leaves two men extry. We're standin' what cow hands calls "runnin' guard." Which means that them as stands fust guard tonight goes on second tomorrow night, an' so on till they've stood last guard. Then they gits a night off afore they starts over onct more. Which gives all hands a even break.

There's bosses a plenty as don't stand no night guard but I ain't amongst 'em. We'd drawed straws fer guards an' guard pardners. Jess an' 'Dobe is together on last guard. Me an' a towheaded Mormon boy named Cotton Top on account uh his hair, draws third guard.

Pecos an' Bert Bingham, a Mormon boy, is off at midnight an' we goes out. There's a moon an' it's fair tuh middlin' warmish. The remuda is grazin' quiet an' some of 'em's bedded down or dozin' on their laigs. We're holdin' 'em in a wide arroyo an' it looks like our only job'll be tuh keep awake. Even the bell hosses, which is apt tuh drag it fer home till they've had the edge rode offen 'em, is actin' good.

I meets Bert who has stayed with the hosses while Pecos wakes me'n Cotton Top. He gives me the guard watch an' we rolls a smoke. Seems like Bert has suthin' on his mind. Directly he spits 'er out.

"Buck," says he, grinnin' kinda sheepish, "Don't figger me out as bein' boogery er scairt, fer I ain't. I jest want tuh give yuh warnin' that somebody's sneakin' aroun' this bunch uh hosses."

"How many of 'em, Bert?" Somehow the news didn't su'prise me much. Them pisanos likes good hosses.

"That's the funny part uh it, Buck," he tells me. "I ain't seen a soul. Nor a bush wiggle. But Calico, here, hates Mexicans an' he smells 'em. I bought him off a pisano at Tucson when he was a skinny, sore-backed two-year-old colt. The Mex was beatin' him over the head. I give him ten dollars fer Calico, then put him in the hospital fer a long rest when I'd got his John Henry on the bill uh sale. Calico kin smell one uh them chili chawers a mile off, an' I'm tellin' you, Buck, he's smelt several during the past two hours. Be keerful. I told Pecos but he jest hoorawed me fer bin' spooky."

"Pecos," I tells Bert, "ain't spent as many years along the border as I have. We kin look fer trouble anytime from now on. I reckon the Calico hoss is right. That's why yuh wanted tuh ride yore private fer a night hoss?"

"It is," says Bert. "Calico's got a heap uh sense. I think dang nigh as much uh this pony as I does my best gal." And him an' his spotted pony fades into the night, Bert a singin' quiet to hisse'f.

BUT as the two hours drags along, it looks like Calico has done made a mistake. While I rides with my carbine acrost my saddle, I don't see so much as a single Mex tuh shoot at. When the guard time is up, I sends Cotton Top in tuh wake Jess an' 'Dobe.

My guard pardner ain't hardly outa sight when my hoss shies off at suthin', snortin' as I spurs him past an' covers the spot with my Winchester. But nothin' stirs in the mesquite brush we jest passed. Not so much as a quail. But I ain't noways satisfied.

Slippin' to the ground, I crawls cloister. Then I sees suthin' dark kinda crouched at the foot of a bush. Without wastin' no more time, I'm on it like a cat a jumpin' a mouse. But when my left hand grabs the flesh of a man's neck, I knows I've got there too late. The gent is dead. My hand comes away from his neck sticky.

I'm too old a hand tuh go strikin' a match, but I drags the body which is still warm, into the moonlight. In spite uh the blood that smears his hair an' face, I knows it's a Mexican. He's bin knifed. I tosses the carcass back in the brush an' rides to meet Jess an' 'Dobe who is comin' by now. I kin hear Jess warblin' some soldier tune.

He laughs when I tells him about the dead pisano. Laughs an' pats his gun.

"Me'n 'Dobe'll have every hoss, come daylight, Buck," he tells me. "An' we're takin' care uh ary gent that aims tuh start anything. Go tuh camp an' sleep easy. Them babies is pickin's fer us boys that's knowed real fightin'."

I rides off in a huff, fergetin' tuh give Jess the guard watch. I'm part way tuh camp when 'Dobe ketches up with me tuh git it.

"Don't be too hard on Jess," says 'Dobe afore he rides back. "He's bin through hell acrost the pond an' it'll take a good many years tuh git over it. Some uh the boys comes back like that."

"You didn't," I snaps, kinda short like.

"No," says he, quiet as hell, "No, Buck, I didn't." An' with that he rides back to the hosses.

I sleep fitful till breakfast time. Pelon relieves Jess an' 'Dobe an' brings in the hosses jest before sunup. I meets him as he hazes 'em into the rope corral. When I've pulled the rope gate up and fastened it, I looks Pelon an' his outfit over keerful. Tied to his ca'tridge belt is suthin' that gives me the shivers, fer all that I ain't what yuh might call chicken-hearted. What I'm lookin' at is some human scalps. It's Pelon, the half-breed Yaqui, that killed the Mexican I'd found in the brush.

There's no use givin' Pelon hell, fer he's bin brung up to his own ways uh doin' things.

"How many?" I asks him in Mex.

"Cinco," he grins, his face crackin' into ten thousand wrinkles till them red-black eyes uh his'n looks like needle points uh fire.

Five Mexicans that Yaqui breed had got hisse'f.

"How many left outa that hoss stealin' party?" I goes on, knowin' that he musta put in the better part uh the night

collectin' them scary little hunks uh hair.

"No mas," he tells me. He's done a clean job of it. Got all of 'em.

Now I've knowed ol' Pelon which means "bald one" in Mex, fer some fifteen years, off an' on. He's wrangled bosses fer me on both sides uh the border an' he's one uh the damn few from yonder side that I'd trust around the next bend in the trail. Pelon's on the level. He's makin' funny motions with his ears now that, onless I'm bad mistook, means that he's got suthin' on his mind besides his sombrero which he's took off one us them dead fellers.

"Y que mas?" I asks him. "What else señor?"

His ears wiggles faster. I've learnt that ear business from playin' poker with him. Them ears signals no less than four of a kind right now. But till that Injun gits ready tuh cut loose the foot rope on his conversation, he's about as gabby as a corpse. Directly he cuts loose with both barrels.

"The Señor Jess Hardy," says Pelon speakin' Mex, "is tell me about that El Toro. He is a brave hombre, that Señor Hardy, but poco loco, no? It is not well to follow one like this El Toro who is a wolf."

NOW, perhaps if El Toro was Mexican, it would not be so bad. But El Toro is worse than a hundred Mexicans. He is pure Yaqui for all that he gets born in Texas. Here and there I have heard men talk of El Toro but I do not listen long. Men's talk is like the bleating of goats when they speak of revolutions and so on and so on. He lights a cigareet an' goes on again.

"Even when the Señor Jess Hardy talks of El Toro, I do not pay so much attention. It is only when I talk with that thrice cursed devil of a Pasqual that I open both ears."

"Who the dad burned hell is Pasqual?"

Pelon shows me one us them scalps, fer all the world like some kid showin' off his best agate marble.

"Pasqual's hair," he explains. "Yaqui. A very wicked man, that Pasqual. Did he not kill my very own son and leave the body for the coyotes and buzzards to fight about? A Wicked man. Señor Bell, but por Dios he did pay the price of his wickedness by dying slowly with my knife in his belly. It was then that he told me of El Toro. That Pasqual would not lie. He say that El Toro is Yaqui. That his men are alsa Yaquis and all the soldiers and rurales in Mexico could not drive them from Black Besa where they live. Even as the death rattle choked in his throat, that Pasqual taunted me and laughed. He says, Señor, that we are all to die soon. Those Yaquis of the Mormon church, the Tejanos, el negro Bob, Señor Smith, you and me. The Señor Jess Hardy who he has know before El Toro saves till the last."

"An' what the hell d'yuh reckon we'll be doin' all this time?" I asks, gittin' hot under the collar when I sees Pelon half believes what this Pasqual injun has told him.

"Quien sabe?" Pelon looks worried.

"Then lemme tell yuh what'll be goin' on, pardner," I lays down the law. "We're gonno be showin' a gang uh lousy two-bit 'breeds how a gringo makes a greaser play coyote. I'll give Nigger Bob a mesquite stick an' turn him loose on 'em. He'll run 'em into their holes an' plug the hole up after 'em. If yo're scairt uh this Toro four-flusher, quit an' go back."

And leavin' him with that tuh think over, I gits my rope an' steps in the corral tuh ketch my hoss. I knows now that no matter how bad Pelon wants tuh lay down his hand, he ain't gonna do it.

Yuh see, there's a sort uh rivalry betwixt Bob an' Pelon over who is the toughest. That crack about Bob whuppin' El Toro with a club shore gits Pelon below the belt.

But as I builds a loop tuh ketch High Fer I sabes Yaquis a plenty an' I knows that it's taken a heap tuh put the fear uh any man in the heart uh Pelon. I'm so bogged down in them thoughts that I miss High Ball an' my loop gits filled with a hoss we calls Jack Pot. Right then an' there me an' Jack Pot opens up a game called "pop the whip," me doin' most uh the poppin'. I've et a pound er so uh corral dust when Pecos, 'Dobe, an Jess swings onto the line an

we brings mister grulla hoss to a whistlin', strikin' standstill.

Now this Jack Pot outlaw is a renegade, spoilt critter that's busted so many top riders that I've condemned him an' jest brung him along hopin' tuh swap him off tuh some pisano fer a mule er two. He's as purty a lookin' chunk uh hossflesh as ever a man'd jump in a week's ride. A mouse colored hoss with black tail an' mane an' yaller eyes. A show hoss if there ever was one an outa a blue-blooded quarter mare an' a Arabian stud. But he's got the disposition of a bobcat.

"Ketchin' this pony fer me?" grins Jess when Jack Pot is choked tuh where he's standin' spraddle legged, whistlin' hell an' damnation at us an' his yallar eyes spittin' fire.

"I'd sorter give him to yuh," says I. "But I ain't hankerin' tuh dig no feller's grave this mornin'. This hoss is a man killer."

"Man killers is my pickin's," brags this big, boastin' idjit. "I bet a new hat he turns pussy cat afore a week's passed. How's chances tuh fork this crowbait?"

"Hop to it," I tells him, "But mind yuh, we knocks all cripples in the head. We don't carry no wagon along tuh pack busted up bronk peelers."

Which I'm lyin', uh course, jest hoorawin' him.

"Buck," he grins, "If this grulla cayuse piles me, I'll shoot myse'f tuh save yuh the trouble."

And with his hackamore hid beyond his back, he goes down the rope toward that whistlin', strikin' outlaw. Jess is bigger'n a skinned mule, an' judgin' from what we now sees, he ain't bothered none by gettin' in his own way. He ears that devil down by hisse'f. We sees them wicked hoofs a whammin' at where Jess's head was jest a split-second before. Dust, Jess's grin, hoofs, an' snappin' teeth. Jack Pot squealin' like a hog, he's that mad. But outa that whirl uh dust an' hoofs comes Jess a grinnin' wide an' Jack Pot wearin' the hackamore.

WE has tuh th'ow an' blindfold Jack Pot tuh saddle him. Jess stands spraddled over him where he lays, still squealin'. When we lets go the foot ropes an' that hoss gits his laigs, Jess is settin' in the saddle, a wide grin a splittin his face. 'Dobe swings aboard his pony tuh haze fer him.

"Yippeeee!" yells Jess, an' slams his hat ag'n' that hoss's head as he jerks off the blindfold.

Then the show is on. When I says show, I takes in the whole works from perade tuh side shows an' free tickets to the concert. Gentle Rannies, that hoss is buckin'. The second jump lands him amongst Bob's kitchen an' there's a scatterment uh Dutch ovens, pot hooks, coffee an' biscuits. Bob's tryin' tuh be in ten places tuh onct, sayin' "Gawdamights!" every jump.

It'd taken two men tuh watch Jack Pot. One tuh say "Here he comes," another tuh sing out, "Yonder he goes." That hoss is givin' Jess all he's got an I'm tellin' a green hand he's got a plenty. He pitches against 'Dobe an' his hoss, knocks 'em down, an' tromps on 'em as he goes yonderly in three directions tuh onct. He's a cross between a buzz saw, strychnine, lightnin' an' a hydrophoby skunk. Each jump he takes is different from the last.

He's swappin' ends so fast that it looks like his tail grows outa his briskit. He rolls like a hoop snake an' twists like a pig's tail. A weavin' an' a windin' an' a snortin' every jump, he leaves Cheyenne. Has he swallered his head? He has, gentlemen, an' all that's left is a hump an' four laigs, each one of 'em goin' a differn't direction. He's a wampus cat an' a wowser, a side hill gouger an' a whiffle ditty. He claws like a cat, strikes like a mule, bawls like a bull, an' all we sees is a blue-colored ball us suthin' with a man on top him. For Jess still has that critter between his laigs an' is still a fannin' him.

We're all trailin' behind by now, about as helpful as a bunch uh deer flies. But Jess ain't needin' no he'p, 'pears like. All he needs is room an' we're givin' him plenty uh that. All uh Mexico.

Twict, that hoss bucks hisse'f plumb off his feet, rollin' over in a cloud uh dust. But when we looks on the ground fer a busted rider, he ain't there. He's back on the hurricane deck, like a sand burr in a blanket.

When Jack Pot th'ows up his head an' stampedes, we knows that Jess Hardy, fer all his danged braggin', is about the neatest rider that ever warmed a saddle. Jack Pot's whupped an' our sombreros is off to the boy that done the trick.

That evenin', when Jess fills the air with stories uh how he's rode hosses that makes Jack Pot look like a ladies' pony, we swallers it without ary word.

'Dobe's more quiet than ever. Jest sets there, not missin' a word. Even when Jess tells it so danged scary that it's nigh sickenin'. It's plain as a fresh brand that 'Dobe has made a hero outa big Jess. He all but rolls Jess's cigareets fer him. Even Pelon takes notice of it an' cusses into his serape, as he sits off to hisse'f by his own fire. Finally Jess gits switched off tuh the war an' he's whuppin' ten Lime Juice gobs when he drops off tuh sleep.

II

I'M on last guard that night an' I reckon I'm kinda jumpy fer when Bert Bingham pulls the tarp offen my head tuh wake me, I wakes up holdin' my .45 in my hand an' the end uh the barrel is jammed in Bert's briskit.

"Easy boss," grunts Bert, as I bats my eyes plumb ashamed.

"Nightmare," I tells him, lyin'. "Et too much grub fer supper."

But I've done told the boys about them Mexicon Yaquis Pelon assinates the night before an' I ain't foolin' Bert none.

"I bin seein' the same boogers, Buck," says he solemn. "An I wa'n't sleepin' neither. Onless I'm guessin bad, Pelon'll have a fresh batch uh scalps, comin mornin'."

"See anybody out yonder?" I asks, as I pulls on my boots.

"Wisht I had," he tells me. "I'd feel better about it."

As me an' Cotton rides out to the herd, I sabes what Bert means. There's jest enough moon tuh make the shadows blacker than they should be an' every bush seems like, is hidin' a Injun. But when I looks, there ain't nobody there. Pecos looks solemn when he hands me the guard watch.

"Yuh jest got here in time tuh keep me from makin' a plumb fool outa myse'f" says he, grinnin' foolish. "My trigger finger was gittin shore itchy."

"Why didn't yuh cut loose at whatever yuh seen?" says I.

"That's the hell of it, Buck," he tells me. "I don't *see* nothin'. And I ain't goin' tuh make a damn fool out uh myse'f talkin' about it. It'd sound loco."

"Tell me about it," I urges him.

"I'll whup you if yuh laugh, dang yur," says Pecos.

"I ain't got so much as a snicker in my system, son," I tells him, "slip yore pack."

"Supposin', Buck, that I tell yuh that I hears a bullet whistle past my head in the dark so clost that I feels the wind of it passin'. But I don't see a soul ner hear the pop of the gun that fires the bullet?"

He spits this out defiant like.

"Sounds silly, don't it, boss? A kid seein' spooks. But I'll swear to it. It happened jest after Bert went to camp to wake you boys. I bin ridin' with a cocked gun ever since. Now laugh, doggone yuh."

"Nary a laugh, son. Did you see the flash uh the gun?"

"The shot come from behind me."

"Ever hear of a silencer on a gun?" I asks him, not more'n half grabbin' what he thinks happened to him.

But there's jest a bare chance that this El Toro might have a rifle that's equipped with one us these silencers. A Texas Ranger showed me one onct. It ain't noways likely this Toro hombre has one but it's always the most unlikely things that a man's gotta expect acrost the border.

I seen a captured rebel outfit onct that was outfitted with everything from hand grenades tuh Lewis guns. That was Colonel Joe Heitmann's army. They lined Heitmann up with his back to the 'dobe wall at Agua Negro and after three volleys still finds that big gent on his feet, bleedin' from a dozen bullet holes, swayin' dizzy like but with his cigareet still in his mouth that's tellin' them Federal soldiers what bum shots they are, the officer in charge walks up to him.

"It is my honor, Señor Colonel Heit-

'mann," says the officer, "to salute one hell of a brave man." And with that he throws Joe a salute, then kills him with his own Luger pistol.

Yeah, Heitmann's men was dang well outfitted. He had guns an' stores cached all over Chihuahua, too. Mebby, thinks I, this El Toro has located one uh these caches which has a gun er two equipped with silencers. They'd be right handy fer snipin guards of a night.

"Like as not, Pecos," I tells the boy, "the gun that feller fired had a silencer attached. Ride on in an' if Pelon is anywhere aroun', send him out. Like as not, though, that scalp liftin' devil is already out here somewheres."

Pecor seems tuh feel easier in his mind as he heads fer camp. When I meets Cotton Top, I tells him what Pecos said an' warns him tuh keep his eyes peeled.

But 'pears like the bushwhackin' gent has gone home fer when daybreak comes we ain't seen, heard, ner smelt nothin'. Ner has Pelon showed up.

NOW Pelon is supposed tuh take the hosses at daylight, but nary sign uh him. I kin see the smoke from the cook's fire now so me an' Cotton starts in with the hosses. As we're crossin' a little arroyo that lays between us an' camp, I sees the leaders split as they pass a certain spot. Cotton likewise notices the way the hosses is actin' an' we hazes the drags to a stiff trot. Together we rides up on what's spookin' the ponies. It's Pecos. He's layin' in a heap, jest as he's fell from the saddle. Even before I slides to the ground, I knows he's dead. There's a hole clean through his neck at the base uh the skull. The shot's a clean one, like a steel jacket bullet's make. It's come from behind and tuh one side. Pecos never knowed what hit him.

Tellin' Cotton tuh stand in his tracks, I looks fer sign. Off to one side is a brush patch. Not a twig is busted but there in the sand is tracks made by some feller that's wore rope soled sandals. Not bein' much of a tracker, I loses the sign where it passes up the hill onto hard ground. Then I goes back with where Cotton's settin' his hoss, lookin' down kinda white like at what was Pecos.

That little pasear I taken was more tuh corral my scattered wits than anything else, but I'm still all mixed up in my mind when I gits back tuh where Cotton's holdin' my hoss an' starin' hard at pore ol' Pecos.

"Don't let this th'ow too much of a scare inta yuh, son," I tells him, misreadin' that white look aroun' his mouth.

"Scare?" says Cotton, slow like, an' looks at me, with his eyes. They're blue. The coldest, hardest blue I ever seen. "Did yur say *'scare,'* Buck?" And he grins sorter crooked.

"If I did, Cotton," says I, "I shore made a big mistake. Let's load Pecos on my hoss an' git him tuh camp.

I knows I got one man that ain't quittin' the game till he lines his sights on the Yaqui that killed Pecor.

'Dobe an' another one uh the boys, gittin' a hunch suthin's wrong, meets us.

"Seen Pelon?" I asks.

"Not since last evenin'," 'Dobe tells me, "when him an' Jess had the run-in an' Pelon drug it outa camp.

"What run-in?" says I.

"It was after you had gone tuh bed. Better git Jess tuh tell yuh about it." 'Dobe, I kin see, don't want tuh be carryin' no tales behind Jess's back.

WELL, I'm purty much on the prod by the time I gits tuh camp. That danged, big-mouthed Jess, with his hoorawin' an' braggin', has picked on Pelon an' I've lost my hoss wrangler. Hoss wranglers is scarce as fleas on a fish an' I ain't thankin' Jess fer runnin' off the Yaqui. The sight uh that big windjammer squattin' by the fire with a cup us coffee an' a cigareet, a grin spread all over his red face, is like wavin' a red rag in a bull's face.

"What the hell's all this about you an' Pelon?" I growls.

"It was after you'd bedded down last evenin', Buck," he 'lows.

"Yo're damn right it was," I snaps, hot as a griddle cake. "Ain't we got trouble enough without you sheep-brained boneheads janglin' amongst yoreselves?"

"Don't blame yuh fer gittin' ringy," nods Jess. "An' so he'p me, Buck I'll

do my dangdest tuh make it up someway. It was my doggoned talkin' as got me into it an' onct I'd begun, I had tuh go through er be hoorawed outa camp.

"All hands except you was settin' aroun' the fire, swappin' lies. We got tuh talkin' about how most fellers is scairt of a knife. Men that's face half a dozen guns, quittin' when a knife flickered, an' such talk. You know how boys'll argue about some fool thing like that.

"One uh the gang, Nigger Bob er one uh them Texas boys, I dunno which, it bein' sorta dark an' them all talkin' with the same Texas lingo, 'lows that no man'll go up ag'in' a knife, bare handed."

"So you up an' says how many knives you've tuk off men, I suppose?" says I, when he stops talkin, tuh swaller some coffee. "Over in France?"

"Suthin' like that," Jess admits. "I don't know at the time that them boys is kinda jobbin' me. I tells 'em that I took a German onct that come at me with a knife a foot long. Which gits a rise outa one uh the boys.

"'I'll bet a week's pay,' says this Texan, 'that you won't tackle a man that's comin' at yuh with a knife.'

"'I take the bet,' I tells him. 'Likewise I'm coverin' all other bets uh the same kind.'

"When I covered all bets," Jess goes on, "I'm stuck tuh work fer six months tuh pay 'em off. Them boys shore trapped me purty."

"Serves yuh right," I tells him. He jest grins.

"Now," Jess goes on, "is where Pelon come into the play. When I tells them tuh trot out their knife man, they fetches Pelon. The Injun is in on the game from the start an' I kin tell by the way he's grinnin' that he's shore enjoyin' it. So I figgers tuh make it worth his while. I knows he'd taken a fancy tuh that silver rig uh mine.

"'Pelon,' I tells him, playin' my string out. 'If yuh win, my outfit is yourn. But yuh gotta make a good job uh whuppin' me, mind? If yur lose, I'm claimin' them scalps uh yourn.'

"'Si, si, grunts Mister Injun, thinkin' uh that saddle. So I sheds my gun belt, peels my shirt off, an' me an Pelon goes at it."

"Yuh mean tuh tell me, Jess," says I, knowin' Pelon is as wicked a knife man as ever I'd seen, an' I've met a plenty that was shore fast, "That yuh tackled Pelon bare handed an' him with a knife in his hand? After yur told him he'd win that fancy saddle? Pelon's a good hoss wrangler but he'd go out tuh win that bet if he had tuh kill yuh!"

"You ain't tellin me no news, Buck," grins Jess. "That's why I made the game worth his while. Between me'n you, I hate greasers an' Injuns."

"But gashamighty, feller, Pelon's greased ligthnin' with a knife!" I'm fergittin' that I'm sore at this big, grinnin' overgrowed kid.

"That ain't nothin' new tuh me neither," Jess says. "He's shore handy with his barlow, that baby. It'd taken me all us ten minutes tuh wean it off him when I sees he's goin out fer real blood."

"An' then," cuts in one us the Mormon boys who is coolin' a cup uh coffee, "damned if he don't offer Pelon back the knife an' tell him tuh try again."

"Jest tuh show off a little," I'm su'prised tuh hear Jess admit. "I knowed the fight was done took outa Mister Injun when I takes his Bowie away from him. Injuns can't stand bein' showed up. When the joke's on a Injun, he'll fade outa the picture right away. Ain't I right, Buck?"

"Pelon'll never show up here no more," I guess, not knowin' whether tuh kick his pants er raise his pay er both.

I'm out a hoss wrangler but if this young ox kin whup Pelon's knife bare handed, he's wuth more'n the hundred he's drawin'. Then I recollects Pecos an' springs it on the boys as is still at breakfast an' ain't heered the news. 'Dobe comes up while I'm a talkin'. I tells 'em the whole works. How Pecos had told me uh bein' shot at an' no noise comin' from the gun.

"Now if Pelon was here, mebbe he cud tell us suthin' about this here El Toro," I growls. "But he ain't here, dang it."

"What is it about El Toro, Buck,"

says Jess kinda quiet fer onct, instead uh loud spoke, "that yuh'd like tuh know?"

"A hell of a lot," says I, "that yuh ain't able tuh tell me." I'm kinda hot onct more, thinkin' uh how much good Pelon'd be now. "What d'you know about El Toro, anyhow?"

"Plenty, Buck," grins Jess. "More'n Pelon'd find out in ten years. That El Toro's a danged false alarm. El Toro means The Bull, eh? Bull is right. That bird's full of it, I'm tellin' yuh. I cud run him all over camp with a ramrod. Him an' his yella bellies th'owed in. Soldiers? Bad actors? Horseradish, Cap. El Toro was plain Juan Herrera when I knowed him. Yella? You tell 'em. The sneakin' coyote. He was a buck private in my company an' I had tuh keep a two-man detail after we left Brest, tuh keep Mister Juan Herrera from goin' A. W. O. L. fer the rest uh the war. He tried stealin' an' gittin' caught at it so he'd go to the hoosegow but I shook him down fer what he stole, bocoo francs besides, an' kicked his pants ahead tuh where we was goin' tuh look clost at the war we heard was bein' fought up ahead. Yeah. Then he tries shootin' hisse'f in the leg but I ties a rag on a ramrod, soaks mister rag in iodine, an swabs out the hole. He don't even whimper, I'll say that fer him, when I gives him that first aid attention. Then I makes him bandage that wheel an' come along over the top with me that night tuh smoke Jerry out his dugout. Do I know El Toro? Do I know that lousy bum? I know that bird like a school kid sabes his A B C's. El Toro is Juan Herrera an' Juan Herrera is wanted right now fer desertion. He goes 'over the hill' at Camp Kearney in California where he's in the hoosegow waitin' court-martial fer insubordination."

"What about his army?" I asks Jess, not givin' much of a damn about El Toro's record in the U. S. Army, although it kinda takes the edge uh mystery off this Toro feller tuh know he's not a plumb native.

"His army? Dunno, Cap. Only what Pelon tells me. Some Mex. Mostly Yaquis."

"Equipment?"

"Quien sabe?" shrugs Jess. "Not me. A good man with a double bitted ax cud go through his black an' tan warriors like a sharp knife through lard, and them armed with machine guns."

"Yuh-all ain' never fit many Yaquis, Jess," grins Nigger Bob, "when they's all loaded up on marijuana weed."

"Which ain't gettin' us nowheres, you two arguin'," I cuts that rag chawin' short right now. "What I want tuh know is how good El Toro's men is equipped. Pecos was shot by a bullet which don't make a noise."

"Silencer, huh?" nods Jess. "I've heered of 'em. But it ain't likely this Injun's got nothin but a few blunderbusses."

"Unless he's located Heitmann's caches," says 'Dobe, quiet, sorter.

Now I've learnt this much about 'Dobe. He don't never open his mouth without sayin' suthin' worth listenin' to. I knows without askin' that he ain't passin' on no second-hand information. All of a sudden I'm connectin' up Pelon an' 'Dobe who has knowed each other before, accordin' tuh what 'Dobe tell me that day I hires him. Pelon was captain of Colonel Joe Heitmann's Yaqui scouts.

"What d' you know about Heitmann's caches, 'Dobe?" I asks.

HE gives me a quick look an' his eyes looks at me suspicious. Yuh see, it ain't exactly healthy, down in Mexico, fer them as was in any way connected with Joe Heitmann. Fer barrin' a stroke of bad luck an' bein' double-crossed by a certain man Joe trusted, that big soldier uh fortune would uh changed the gover'ment uh Mexico. He'd uh took Mexico in six months.

The gent that double-crossed Joe Heitmann was paid big dough. But he never lived tuh spend so much as a peso of it afore one uh Heitmann's friends cut him down, in spite of the body guard that herded him night an' day. Yep, a certain faction in Mexico was shore after Heitmann's scalp. Likewise they've put a fancy price on the heads uh certain ones that was mixed up with the colonel. How does I know all this? Because I'd bin sent tuh Mexico to verify Colonel Joe Heitmann's capture, that's why, an'

that's how come I'm in Agua Negro when this rebel chief is shot.

An' while the thing has bin squashed, I'm still kinda interested concernin' parts uh the deal. Not too danged interested, sabe, fer that ain't healthy neither. But all of a sudden I'm shore curious regardin' one 'Dobe Smith an' how much he knows about Joe Heitmann. Mexico politics, some few years ago, was a plumb interestin' study. I'm lookin' at 'Dobe now as I asks him about then hidden guns. An' jest as plain as if he told me that he was leary of me, he shakes his head, grinnin' kinda.

"What does I know about Colonel Joe Heitmann an' them guns he hid?" He breaks a kinda awkward silence. "Not a damn thing, Buck Bell." He's speakin' loud enough tuh be heard by every man there.

"Uh course he don't know nothin', Buck," laughs Jess. "Him bein' somewheres in the Argonne about the time that Heitmann plants the guns."

Does 'Dobe git kinda white around the face? Mebby it's jest the half-light uh dawn. But the terbaccer he's pourin from a sack into a brown cigareet paper is spillin' all over. I has enough sense tuh change the subject an' we lays over that mornin' tuh plant pore Pecos an' hunt aroun' fer signs.

There's hoss tracks a plenty, about two miles from camp. El Toro an' his men has done drug it, though. Of Pelon, not a track. He's took the fastest horse in the remuda an' gone yonderly. But tied tuh Jess Hardy's saddle is three fresh scalps. Pelon, havin' lost his bet, is payin' it, an' givin' some extra scalps fer good measure. Er mebbyso he misunderstands an' thinks he's bound tur turn over all the hair he lifts while us boys is workin' in Mexico an' Jess is alive tuh drag down his end uh the bet. Anyhow, when Jess goes tuh saddle his hoss, there's them scalps. Injuns is shore queer folks, any way yuh take 'em.

III

WE'RE gittin' clost tuh where the cattle is numerous an' plenty now. Movin' camp tuh Apache Springs, we gits ready tuh work the country. From that one center, we kin work the country fer what cattle we kin handle. That means no more camp movin' an' Nigger Bob agrees tuh jingle the remuda an' cook besides when I tells him he kin have Pelon's pay fer the work.

I ain't standin' no guard that night, but I don't lay good on the bed ground. I'm wide awake when Jess an' 'Dobe comes in off fust guard. The fire's died down an' I sees 'Dobe throw some mesquite sticks on the coals.

"Damn it," snaps Jess, "Don't do that." An' I sees him kick away the wood afore it blazes up.

"Why, Jess, what ails yuh?" I hears 'Dobe saying', kinda hurt like.

"I ain't aimin' tuh make myse'f a target, that's all," growls Jess, cranky, sorter. "Yuh know what happened tuh Pecos. No use in a man givin' them bushwhackers a chanct tuh git him from the dark."

"Never thought uh that," says 'Dobe, keerless. "Yuh didn't see nothin' while we was on guard, did yur, Jess?"

"Hell, no!" snaps Jess, an' somehow I gits the hunch that the big feller's lyin'.

Directly they've et a cold biscuit an' a cup uh cold coffee, they goes tuh bed. I takes special notice that Jess is bedded down betwixt Cotton an' another boy.

I lays there in bed as long as I kin stand it. I'm jumpy as a dang cat, waitin' fer suthin', I dunno what, tuh happen. I'm wearin' a new wool underclothes an' they're itchin' in fifty places tuh onct. A cow bawls an' I finds myse'f settin' up in bed, my gun in my hand. An' I ain't the only one that's woke up thataway. Yonder's big Jess, on his laigs, crouchin'-like with a six-gun in his hand. I lays down afore he sees me an' watches.

"That you, Jess?" I hears Cotton Top askin', his voice thick with sleep. Jess hides his gun an' sets down.

"It shore is, boy," he tells Cotton, an' seems like his voice is kinda funny soundin', "jest come in off guard."

"How's everything?" grunts Cotton.

"Finer'n frog's hair, boy," Jess tells him, crawlin' under his blankets onct more. Fer the second time since he got in off guard, Jess has lied.

Them wool underwear is itchin' onct more. Directly I slips outa bed an' pulls

on my boots an' overalls. But afore I moves off the bed ground, I takes off my spurs. Likewise I leaves my hat. Afoot, I slides into the brush quiet as I kin travel. Thinks I as I slips along like a dang coyote, I'm gittin' as boogery as the rest uh the outfit.

I reckon I've bin gone nigh half a hour an' I've circled the camp an' took off in the direction uh the mesa where the hosses is bedded, when suthin' pulls me up short. Somewheres ahead I hears voices, talkin' low. Jest a sorter murmur that I wouldn't uh heered if my ears hadn't bin listenin' keerful. I squats low alongside the twistin' cow trail, my gun shore handy.

The voices has stopped. Thinks I, mebbyso they've heered me comin'. Still, I ain't made no noise tuh speak of. I waits, ondecided as tuh stay put er go ahead. Then I hears a hoss's hoofs crunch gravel where the trail crosses the crick.

I'm squattin' low, sabe? Two hundred feet away is a little rise. I waits, my eyes fixed on the rim uh that hill which shows ag'in' the sky. I ain't got long tuh wait. There, plumb clear ag'in' the moonlight, a hossbacker is skylighted. Even if I didn't recognize that big sombrero an' the way the feller sets his hoss, I'd know the hoss amongst a thousand. It's the Gila Roan an' the man's that's forkin him is Pelon. Then he drops out sight beyond the rim.

A snappin' branch brings me outa my speculatin'. A man is comin' along the trail to'rds camp an' he's comin' cautious.

Thinks I, here's where I gits myse'f a Yaqui. But I don't. Not by a damn sight. Fer when that hombre passes me so clost I could uh knocked his ears off with my gun barrel, I sees that it ain't no Yaqui. It's the gent that calls hisse'f 'Dobe Smith!

My fust hunch is tuh shove my gun in his belly and find out what the hell's the idee in sneakin' off in the night tuh pow-wow with Pelon who has stole the best hoss in the remuda. Then suthin' tells me tuh play fox an' lay low. Follerin' out this second idee, I lets 'Dobe go past me an' on to camp. Later thinkin' like hell, but gittin nowheres' I follers him an' goes back tuh bed.

I lays there in bed, thinkin' till my skull aches. I'm like a kid tryin' tuh put together bits of a puzzle with some uh the pieces missin'. I'm still all bawled up when I drop off tuh sleep.

Then somebody's shakin' me gentle.

"Shhhh, Buck. Don't make no noise," somebody whispers. It's Bert Bingham, him as was Pecos' guard pardner.

"What's the rip?" I whispers back, pullin' on my boots.

"Slim Warner, one uh the Texas boys," he tells me, still whisperin'. "Dead."

And I recollects that I'd put Slim an' Bert on third guard together. I gits my hoss an' follers Bert off into the dark.

There clost tuh where I last seen Pelon ride over the hill, Bert points out Slim, layin' face down on the trail. When I examines him I sees he's bin shot in the neck, the same as Pecos. The same man has murdered both them boys an' whoever he is he's a crack shot. Jest a clean hole drilled plumb through the neck at the base uh the skull.

"Slim had rode back tuh camp fer tebaccer," Bert explains. "When a half hour went by an' he didn't come back, I loped over thisaway tuh see what had 'come uh him. I finds him like this."

"Who's stayin' with the hosses?" I asks.

"Why—why nobody, Buck. I'd clean fergot the remuda, thinkin' uh Slim bein' killed, an' Calico smellin' Injuns continual."

"Stay here with Slim," I tells him, feelin' sickish inside, fer I know without lookin' that we ain't got no more remuda left than a jackrabbit. Them Yaquis out-foxed Bert, that's all an' the outfit's set afoot except fer our night hosses.

I SPURS my hoss to a run an' toppin' the mesa beyond, takes a quick pasear aroun' the place where our hosses should uh bin. Not a hoss.

Jerkin' out my six-shooter, I empties her in the air. It's the alarm signal that'll bring every man in camp on a keen run. Directly they swarm up over the skyline hell bent fer election an' it's Nigger Bob, forkin' a white mule which is his favorite pet, that's leadin' the perade. His eyes is rollin' like white marbles an' he's in his sock feet, but each

uh them big paws uh hisn holds a long-barreled Colt's gun.

"What at is them El Toro pole cats, Mista Buck?" says Bob. "Is yuh-all hurt bad?"

"Not yet," I tells him, an' turns to the boys.

"They've headed south toward Black Mesa. Scatter out till yuh kin barely make out one another's hats in the moonlight. Jess, you take the left end uh the line. Bob, you take the right end. Kill everything that looks like a man. Travel at a stiff trot. Is Bert with yuh?"

"Right here, Buck," Bert sings out. "Didn't figger I cud he'p Slim none by stayin' with him. It was my fault that the hosses—"

"Yuh done what any man 'ud uh done, son," I lies tuh him, knowin' he feels like a sheep stealin' dog fer losin' the remuda. It ain't he'pin none tuh bawl him out.

"You go with Bob, Bert. Cotton, you go with Jess. Where's 'Dobe Smith?"

Nary answer. 'Dobe ain't with the rest. Ner has any man seen him. Then I remembers what my own eyes has seen jest a couple uh hours afore Slim gits killed an' the hosses run off.

Pelon an' 'Dobe Smith holdin' a confidential talk off in the brush. Right then an' there I adds two an' two an' makes a army. Joe Heitmann's army. Pelon who was a captain uh his Yaquis. 'Dobe who has knowed Pelon before an' knows the country. 'Dobe Smith whose name never was Smith. Who is 'Dobe Smith?

"Jess," I asks that big feller point blank, "what happened out here tonight when you an' 'Dobe was on guard?"

"Huh?" he grunts.

"You know what I'm drivin' at," I tells him. "What happened?"

"Not a damn thing, Buck. That's the hell of it. It's the waitin' that gits a man's goat. Waitin' fer a shot in the back. When I gits my night hoss, there's a note on my saddle horn which says I'm goin' on a long trip soon. A friend uh mine claims he's got a bullet with my name on it. Juan Herrera 'lows he's about tuh square an old grudge, that's all. It's got me jumpy, Cap. The damn coward won't fight a man in the open. Pelon's throwed in with him, bet on that. Same breed uh skunks, both of 'em.

"Hmm. Got ary idee what 'come uh 'Dobe?"

"No more'n you have, Cap. Don't even know he'd gone anywheres." I kin tell by his voice that he ain't lyin'. More than that, I knows that Jess Hardy is scairt. Yes, sir, he's plumb scairt. I tries one last chance at findin' out if what I suspect is true.

"Bob," I asks that black feller who knows his Mexico plenty, "did yuh ever git a look at a gent named Jim Gilbert?"

"Captain Jim Gilbert uh Heitmann's layout? Gent dat bumped off that Mexican dat double-crossed Heitmann?"

"Same gent, Bob. Ever see him?"

"Ain't never laid an eye on him, Mista Buck. Folks says he ain't a big feller. Man about 'Dobe Smith's size. Quiet, but a fightin' fool. He was killed by rurales below Torreon."

"Sure uh that, Bob?"

"Mista Buck," Bob tells me solemn, "I ain't noways sure uh nothin' in Mexico. I bin dead a few times myse'f. I bin sizin' up Mista 'Dobe on my own accord. He sho' tallies up with what folks says about this here Captain Gilbert. Me, I dunno. Dunno nothin', Mista Buck."

"Don't blame yur, Bob. Well, hit the trail, boys. I'll be in the middle uh the line, sabe? Let's go!" And we swings down the wide mesa at a long trot.

IT'S one uh them Southwestern nights when the stars hang low in a silver-white sky. Yonder, like they're cut from purple-black cardboard, is the jagged peaks that stand between Apache Springs an' Black Mesa.

The hoofs of our horses strike the lava beds an' sparks shoot out like from under a blacksmith's hammer. Where the moonlight hits the black lava spots that lay like blots between the grass clumps, they takes on the appearance uh little lakes after a rainstorm. The moon is a white ball, cut in half. A lovers' night if ever there was one. Yet we're about tuh splatter it with human blood.

Fer a hundred a month an' ammunition, we're killin men that's jest as human as we are. Men that loves life the same as us boys. They kill because they're ignorant, but how about us fellers? Nary

one of us belongs down here in Chihuahua. We're gatherin' cattle fer a big concern that don't even know us by name. They don't think enough of our lives tuh put up ransom money if we're took by some outlaw gang. A hundred a month an' ca'tridges.

Then I thinks uh Slim layin' back yonder, an' I quits speculatin' on the why an' wherefor uh life. Then suthin' whistles past my head. A bullet? Dunno. Yonder's a fast movin' blot slippin' into the night acrost the mesa. Spurrin' my hoss to a run, I cuts down on mister rider with my Winchester.

But it's like shootin' at a ghost. I'm ridin' my hoss at a run when outa the night, headed straight for me, comes a bigger blot. I pulls up sudden, shootin' three times in quick succession which is the signal for the boys tuh come to me on a run. As the echoes uh my last shot dies away. I hears the jingle uh hoss bells. That blot is the remuda, comin' our way.

"Hallooo, Buck!" calls a voice t'other side uh the hosses.

It's 'Dobe Smith's voice. I hollers back, quick enough an' my boys comes lopin' up tuh he'p me wonder how come 'Dobe is hazin' that remuda back home. We circles the bunch uh scairt hosses an' meets 'Dobe.

"Them Injuns like tuh set us afoot, eh, Buck?" says he. "I had tuh nigh ride my hoss down ketchin' up to 'em. Got any cigareet makin's on yuh?"

Jess an' the other boys asks 'Dobe a hundred questions but he jest grins some an' shakes his head.

"Nuthin' mysterious about it boys," he says. "I gits sorter restless like an' rid out tuh auger a while with the boys on guard. Finds the remuda movin' yonderly shore fast an' suspicious, so I falls in' behind an' fetches 'em back.

"What about them gents that was doin' the hoss rustlin'?" I asks. "They turned them ponies over to yuh fer the askin', I reckon?"

"Suthin' like that, Buck," he grins. "There was only four in the party. They wa'n't hard tuh convince, onct they seen I aimed tuh take the hosses away from 'em. Pecos' hoss an' Slim's is in the bunch. Two uh the Yaquis had claimed 'em but they've gone where they won't need hosses no more. How about that cigareet, Buck?"

I DON'T find out till we've hit camp that 'Dobe is packin, three ugly lookin' knife slits in his hide. None of 'em dangerous, but plenty painful. He sips his coffee as I bandage him up. Sometimes I ketches him lookin' at me, half smilin' outa his eyes. The boys has brung in Slim's body an' we're gonna plant him after breakfast which Bob is th'owin' together.

Jess Hardy is settin' on his bed roll, quiet as a rock. Danged if he don't look like he's lost twenty pounds. His face is a sorter grey color an' there's a long scratch along his neck. Not exactly a scratch, neither. More like a burn. It comes to me that I ain't heered him say more'n a dozen words since he got it.

As I'm lookin' at him, he looks up. He tries tuh grin but it makes him look all the more sickly. Then he tosses a buckskin pouch into the brush near by.

"That damn Injun," he says, comin' over an' pourin' hisse'f a cup uh coffee, musta bin here in camp while we was gone. That damn sack had three fresh scalps in it. Found it layin' on my bed." And as he lifts his coffee cup, the stuff spills down his shirt front, his hand is that shaky.

Now don't git the idee that I'm blamin' this Jess boy fer bein' spooky. From cook tuh boss, we're shore jumpy. Nigger Bob's fondlin' of his rabbit's foot an' workin' a voodoo charm he gits offen his brother-in-law's brother who is a herb docter er suthin'. The Mormon boys is fallin' back on their bishop's teachin's an' doin' it in a quiet, unashamed way that is shore calm an' convincin'. The Texas boys, who had kin-folks at the Alamo, gits more quiet an' their eyes is shore hard an' dangerous. My nerves is scraped to the quick an' I don't enjoy my grub none.

Nope, I ain't blamin' Jess Hardy fer bein' scairt, but every man there seems tuh kinda enjoy seein' him squirm. He's so danged big an' has bin travelin' fer so long on his toughness, sabe? I'm gittin' right curious about that red welt along his neck.

DID I say we was all of us spooky? Not quite all. 'Dobe Smith, so he'p me Hiram, is as perky as a dad-gummed fightin' rooster. Yeah. Chipper as a medder lark, squattin' there with a cigareet an' a cup uh java, wiser'n a hoot owl an' cool as a watermelon on ice. He waves his hand toward a high peak where a tall, thin smoke is risin' skyward.

"Yaqui smoke signal Buck," he says keerless. "Injuns is like rattlers, thataway. Warnin' afore they strike. Directly yuh'll see more smokes. We're plumb surrounded. We couldn't run if we wanted tuh."

"Nobody said nothin' about runnin'," I tells him. "But if yuh knowed so much about El Toro, yuh picked a hell of a time fer spillin' the news."

'Dobe nods, thoughtful.

"Looks thataway, boss, don't it? But I didn't know myse'f till I seen them smokes. El Toro's a foxy proposition."

"Hell!" snorts Jess. "That dirty faced Injun foxy? He's about the dumbest buck that ever mishandled a rifle in the rear ranks."

"Yuh fergit Jess," says 'Dobe, soft like, "that El Toro is in his own back yard right now. Amongst his own people, fightin' the only way he knows how tuh fight. Put him in uniform, where big shells is bustin' around him, where he has tuh hide his face in a gas mask, an' he's not much account. Kinda bewildered. But here in the open, fightin' with his own methods, he's a snake an them as figgers he ain't has got a hard lesson comin'. He ain't Juan Herrera, buck private, no longer. He's General El Toro an' his medicine is shore strong."

"Gimme my old company, a machine gun an' a sack full uh grenades, an' I'll clean up on that gang."

'Dobe kinda smiles an' borrows another smoke.

"Why damn it all, 'Dobe, *you* was over there!" blusters Jess, "*you* sabe what I mean."

'Dobe twists his cigareet into shape an' lights it. Then, kinda white around his lips, his eyes hard as glass with a sorter defiant look, he stands up facin' Jess an' me an' the other boys who quits eatin' when they sees the look on 'Dobe Smith's face.

"Jess," says he, but his words is meant for every man there, "when I said I was in the Ninty-first Division, I lied. If I'd uh gone when my name was called, I'd uh bin in that outfit. But I didn't go. Back in Douglas, Arizona, my home town, my name is posted on the slacker list. I'm a damned slacker, get that? A damned slacker!" And his fist closes over his cigaret, the lighted end burnin', unfelt into the palm uh his hand.

Nobody speaks. What was there tuh say, anyhow? There stands 'Dobe, white as a hunk uh chalk, his eyes burnin' like two hot coals. Me and Nigger Bob swaps a quick look. There's a sneer on Jess Hardy's face that I felt like wipin' off with a machete. Like a hell of a lot us other folks, Jess is condemnin' 'Dobe Smith without givin' him a chanct. But I swallers that cravin' tuh smash that big windjammer.

"'Dobe," I asks, quiet as I kin make my voice sound, "what was yore name, back there in Douglas?"

"I went tuh jail under my right name uh Gilbert," says he. "James Gilbert. They was arrestin' draft dodgers them days." Then he kinda smiles with his mouth, but his eyes is still hard, "I broke jail under the same name."

Now the name "Jim Gilbert" don't mean nothin' tuh nobody but me an' Nigger Bob. But us two knows that standin' there is one uh the bravest men that ever kept his mouth shet about it. Not James Gilbert, slacker, but Captain Jim Gilbert uh Heitmann's Rebels. Singlehanded, with a price on his head that run into five figgers, Captain Jim Gilbert had rode alone down the main street uh Agua Negro till he found the man who had bin Heitmann's traitor. Without drawin' his gun he puts the skids under that hombre's body-guard uh ten soldiers, gives this double-crossin' dog a chanct tuh go fer his gun, then shoots him down an' rides over his body an' outa town. If he'd uh let his hoss break into a trot, he'd uh bin drilled by fifty bullets. But his hoss goes down the street at a pacin' walk while this Captain Jim Gilbert uh Heitmann's Rebels, rolls hisse'f a husk cigareet an' don't so much as look back over his shoulder.

I got that yarn straight, from the Fed-

eral captain hisse'f who seen it with his own eyes. When I asks him why he don't shoot Gilbert, he shrugs them slim shoulders uh his, flicks at some dust on a pair uh ninety dollar cavalry boots, an' shows a set uh white teeth under his mustache, which is waxed to needle points.

"Does one kill a hell of a brave man, Señor Bell, because that brave one has exterminate a reptile snake? Besides, that money which the reptile snake is carry in that money belt of his around the belly, will now go back to the government."

But because that Federal captain is a gentleman an' soldier an' has a level head for business, ain't sayin' that them paddle foot soldiers is anyways under orders not tuh down Gilbert. Not by a brown jug full.

NOW I knows about that deal. Likewise, Jim Gilbert knows that I know. He's givin' me a sharp look warnin' me tuh keep my mouth shet, but I ain't gonna sit there an' let a man like Jim Gilbert git branded fer a yaller coward. I'm on my laigs an' talkin' afore he kin stop me.

"Boys," I tells 'em, "I fit fer Uncle Sam afore any uh you was old enough tuh own a pair uh boots. I dunno how come 'Dobe Smith, whose name in Agua Negro is Captain Jim Gilbert, missed out on goin' with his Ninety-first Division. But I knows this much. It wa'n't because he was yaller. Them as has any queer idees, had better swaller the same an' don't go coughin' 'em up."

Then I turns tuh 'Dobe.

"Yo're Jim Gilbert from now on, pardner. Captain Jim Gilbert. If you'll take charge uh this outfit, it's yourn. You sabe the country an' them Yaquis. Will yuh take command here?"

Gilbert's face, white a minute before gits kinda red.

"That's white uh you, Buck," says he. "But I don't think Jess er the other boys'd want a slacker fer leader here."

"Go 'long white boy!" Bob busts out, grinnin' like a big black ape. "We all got puss'nal reasons fer things. Dat wah was kinda bawled up anyways. Me, ah was in jail at El Paso when we-all declah's in. Sheriff 'lows immunity fer me an' fo' mo' crap shootin gen'lmen as is layin' in his hoosegow, does we 'list up an' go oveh yonder to mix up in 'at scrap wif dem German boys. Facin' tuhty days at hahd labah, I does so. Does I bettah myse'f? Man, I'm out to loadin' trucks at El Paso. I'm still loadin' 'em when de wah shets down. My idee uh the American soldier's uniform is fatigue ovahalls. Cap'n Jim Gilbert, ah salutes a hones' to Gawd fightin' man."

Which he does. Them Texas boys knows niggers. They knows Bob is what we calls a "bad" nigger. Which means that his brand uh toughness is plumb leak proof. When Bob 'lows a man has guts there ain't no further use fer argument. They sides with Bob, loud an' profane, as the feller says.

The Mormon fellers foller suit. To a man, they like this quiet mannered feller.

Jess Hardy grins crooked like. Mebbyso he's kinda jealous. Er it might be that he's so choke full uh patriotism that he's hide-bound. But he sees he's licked an' admits it.

"I was top kick," says Jess, "under the hardest boiled skipper that ever wore a Sam Brown. Yuh got a mark tuh shoot at. Do yore stuff, Cap'n."

He snaps to attention an' throws Gilbert a trick salute that carries jest a hint uh insult. Gilbert ignores the last named part as he returns it.

Somehow, afore we knows it, that cow spread is turned into a little two-bit army.

"SERGEANT JONES," snaps Gilbert, an' damned if his clothes don't seem tuh hang on him like a uniform, "count off a detail uh three men."

Jess does so. He's a soldier again. A hard-boiled, swaggerin' top sergeant. His scaredness uh the night before is gone. He lines up Cotton an' two other boys.

"Yo'll go a hundred yards down the wash from the spring, Sergeant," says Gilbert. "Take a shovel an' dig under the rimrock there. Bring back what yuh find."

Jess an' his men trot off down the wash. Gilbert turns to me.

"You wished this on me, Buck, darn yuh. Now lend me a hand. Where's a good spot, in yore estimation, tuh make a stand?"

I points to a high knoll that's all cluttered with granite boulders. He nods, grinnin'. Then he points to a black spot up among the grey rocks.

"Pelon;" he says. "Watchin' El Toro's smokes with glasses. God only knows what odds we're buckin' here. They're out tuh clean us up. And may the good Señor Dios have mercy on one Sergeant Jess Hardy, fer Juan Herrara wants him alive. Yuh know what that means, Buck?"

Knowin' Yaquis an' Injuns in general, I does. It'll be torture fer Jess. Staked out naked on a big ant hill, mebby, his body smeared with some sticky sweet stuff. Er whittled on with knives that ain't too sharp. An' while Jim Gilbert is too much of a white man tuh say so, sabes that Jess Hardy has brung this on us with his bullyin' of buck private Juan Herrera over in the big war.

"What brung Jess into Chihuahua?" I asks.

"I reckon El Toro sent him word that Juan Herrera dared him tuh come down here an' fight. Suthin' like that. The big idiot didn't know what he was runnin' into. Don't be too hard on him, Buck, he didn't sabe."

"But he's beginnin' tuh sabe."

"Exactly," smiled Gilbert. "Last night got him thinkin'. That scar on his neck kinda shocked him."

"One uh them silent bullets?" I makes a guess.

"Bullets?" Gilbert chuckles soft like. "Bullets, nothin'. Arrows, Buck. Injun arrows. Pelon knowed all the time. Fact is, it was Pelon that creased Jess with the bow an' arrow he taken off one uh them Yaqui hoss stealers. He told me about it when I met him after me'n Jess come in off guard. It was me that laid Pelon's scalps on Jess' bed, when we all got back tuh camp after the hoss stealin' party was over. Jess was so damned cocky, Buck, I never told him it was a arrow. The scalps scare 'im, too, an' I owed that much tuh Pelon fer past favors."

I agrees with him.

"Pelon aimed tuh kill Jess with that arrow?"

"The next time," says Gilbert. "I had tuh talk some tuh explain tuh Pelon that Jess was jest a big, overgrowed kid. It was shore hard tuh make that Yaqui see it my way. Only fer the fact that he knowed me when we both soldiered under Heitmann, I'd never uh bin able tuh do it."

"Any man that kin convince Pelon uh anything, is a world beater. He must think yo're a tin god on wheels, mister."

"I jerked him out from in front of a rurale firin' squad onct," Gilbert admits, kinda like he's ashamed uh it. "Injuns don't fergit things like that."

He has Bert and the other boys bury pore Slim afore we moves camp up the knoll. Pelon's taken charge uh the remuda now an' he's keepin' 'em clost bunched.

"There's a stone corral up yonder," says Jim Gilbert. "Barrin' one item, she's a humdinger of a place tuh stand a siege."

"What's that one thing?" says I, "water?"

"Water," he tells me. "An' this El Toro is jest enough Americanized tuh play on our weak spot, Buck."

Which makes us feel like a man holdin' four cards of a bob-tail royal flush, in a game where the pot is a shore big 'un. If we kin figger out the water proposition, we got those Yaquis whupped.

"By fillin' the canteens, goin' easy on the water, an' pumpin' plenty uh hot lead into them pisanos," I tells Gilbert, "we'd orter hang an' rattle till we bust the backbone uh their fightin' speerit."

"We're gonna have tuh kill off a few uh them pore ignerant devils," he says, thoughtful. "They'll be drunk an' full uh hop, plumb loco. We'll be slaughterin' men that ain't in their right minds, Buck. Hell, ain't it?"

JESS an' his men is coming' back now. That big gent is grinnin' wide an' I sees the reason. They're packin' two Lewis machine guns wrapped in waterproof sacks.

"Heitmann's cache, Jim?" says I. I'm callin' him Jim now. He nods his head, his eyes sorter broodin'.

"Joe Heitmann's cache, Buck. The only one uh five caches that the rurales

never found. There's plenty uh ammunition planted there, too." He gives me a funny look an' kinda laughs.

"Recollect the night, Buck, that you an' yore boys laid along the north bank uh the Rio, waitin' tuh ketch Joe Heitmann's gun runners?"

"You knowed about that?" I asks.

"I shore did, pardner," he chuckles. "It was me as was crossin' them guns an' ammunition. The same as Jess is fetchin' now. Ain't yuh glad now that I out-foxed yuh that night an' run them guns acrost another route?"

As I he'ps pack that precious store uh ca'tridges up the slope, I shore am glad I got out-figgered that night that seemed such a long time ago. Likewise, it sets me thinkin' about how ol' man Fate takes a hand in things. At the time I missed out on that load uh smuggled guns, I was shore cussin' my luck. I was so danged disgusted at bein' outguessed, I th'owed up my job. No, it weren't a gover'ment job. Yuh might call it hi-jackin'. A cattlemen's pool that was on t'other side uh the fence from Joe Heitmann. Border politics, yuh might say. More'n that, I ain't doin' any talkin' on that subject. It ain't healthy, even now. Not by a brown jug full.

Me an' Heitmann an' Jim Gilbert an' the rest of us that played hide an' find along the border, all tarred with the same brush, yuh might say. Nothin' tuh hang yore head about. On the other hand, nothin' tuh he proud over. Local politics. Border feuds. Both sides out tuh win. Both payin' top wages tuh boys that was handy with a rope an' shootin' iron. Top wages an' free ammunition. No holts barred on either side. Nobody hollerin' fer mercy neither. Both sides dodgin' gover'ment men on either side uh the border. Risky? I'll tell a man.

Fate had kept me an' Jim Gilbert from th'owing hot lead at one another that night. Now here we are, fightin' side by side, yuh might say, with them same guns. Huh? Heitmann's guns? Quien sabe, friend? It was a gamblin' an' saloon syndicate as laid fer 'em in the fust place fer some Mex rebel leader that'd play with them if he won. Some Mexican named Ortega. The guns was planted in a dry wash between Bisbee an' Naco. Then the Mexican governor gits wise an' Ortega is brung up fer trial.

Ley del Fuego, it's called. The Law of Fire. Fire, meanin' the command tuh shoot. Ortega, the prisoner waitin' trial, is "shot while attempting to escape." Git the idee?

Bein' a rebel general down yonder has its drawbacks. Ortega's soul ain't no more'n got tuh wherever it went, afore there's half a dozen scoutin' parties huntin' them buried guns. The ground gits dug up a-plenty aroun' there. Heitmann gits a hot tip where the stuff is hid, calls "keno," an' the rest of us quits diggin' an' goes home tuh figger out how tuh hi-jack Heitmann outa the guns. Yeah, it's a great game. Hundred a month an' ammunition free. A big gamblin' game an' ol' man Fate dealin' from a cold deck.

So we drags the guns an' ammunition cases up the hill an' rips off the waterproofin'. Sergeant Jess is as tickled as a kid with his fust pair uh brass-toed, red-topped boots.

The guns is mounted on their tripods, magazines is shoved full uh .30 shells, an' Jess lectures his gun crews regardin' stoppages, jams, burst uh fives, an' so on. He sabes the gun backwards an' blindfolded and he's got a plumb interested class uh gunners listenin' with everything they got.

Yonder's Pelon on a pinnacle, watchin' the remuda an' keepin' tabs on El Toro's smokes. Barrin' our short supply uh water, we're settin' shore purty.

IV

WE none of us slept heavy that night. Up on our knoll, our hosses restless in their stone corral, we stares out acrost that black darkness below. Darkness that's swarmin' with men we can't see ner hear ner smell. But we knows they're down yonder. Like as not some uh the bolder 'uns is creepin' up the hill amongst the boulders. We all takes care tuh keep our heads below the rock wall we've th'owed up fer a fort. Onct in a while one uh

the boys puts his hat on a gun barrel an' shoves it above the wall. It brings three or four shots an' we keeps awake takin' snapshots at their gun flashes. That night lasts a long time.

Then dawn busts over the skyline an' the show opens. Like a swarm uh ants, they're up an' at us. From then on we're busier'n a bunch uh small boys that's busted open a hornet's nest.

Up they come. Some drunk on tequila, the rest crazy mad with that marijuana weed that's wuss'n loco. Red ants. Hundreds of 'em. Cotton breeches, straw sombreros, loose mouths yellin' as they jerk the levers uh their guns. Some has Springfields er Krags. Others is shootin' Winchesters er Mauser rifles. Now an' then the pop of a shotgun roars amongst the ping uh rifles. A shootin', yellin,' crazy mob, half-dressed, half-starved, half-drunk.

Rat-rat-tat-tat! rattles the machine guns an' brown faces goes down in a red smear. Like brown weeds cut by a mower. Brown weeds with scarlet red leaves. Goin' down tuh be tromped on. Others growin' up faster'n a dozen men kin count. Growin' up an' within', white eyes rollin' in black sockets.

"Marijuana por me! Marijuana 'sta bueno por me!" comes the song from below as the loco fools crowd one another like cattle tuh git mowed down at the top uh the hill.

"Fire low, boys!" calls Captain Jim Gilbert's voice, like a hunk uh ice growin' up outa a bonfire. "Low. Keep yore heads!"

"Steddy as she goes!" barks a Mormon boy that was in the navy. And we turns loose a lot uh loose boulders we got waitin' there.

Then I takes notice uh Jess, standin' above us on his two laigs, smoke a curlin' up from his hot gun barrel, makin' a target outa hisse'f. There's a red stain on his left shirt sleeve an' his lips is drawed back from his teeth in a dead man's grin. He's knockin' down them that tries tuh climb the wall. Crackin' 'em acrost the head an' grinnin'!

When I tries tuh pull him down, he shakes me off like I was a hoss fly.

"Come on an' fight, Herrera!" he's bawlin' at the top uh his lungs. "Come an' get it, ya yaller bellied son of a coyote! Come up an' fight!"

I pulls him down with a flyin' tackle.

"Quit it, yuh dang fool!" I bellers at him. "Use some sense."

"He's scairt tuh come up!" sobs Jess, breathin' hard through his nose. "The damn coward."

"Fergit him fer a while. Quit playin' target."

When he gits his senses back, I lets go my holt. Just in time, too, fer a wild-eyed, jabberin' Yaqui is on my back with a knife. As I squirms under his weight, suthin' roars in my ears an' he falls atop uh me, dead. Jess's .45 bullet has jest nacherally tore the top uh his head off.

"That's one yuh owe me, Buck," he grunts, an' we faces them ugly brown faces that pops above the wall like jack-in-the-boxes.

From somewheres below comes the notes of a bugle. El Toro is havin' his bugler blow retreat. But there's some uh them locoed Injuns that ain't stoppin' fer no bugle. Crazy as hell, they keep comin'. Jim gives orders tuh cease firin' an' beat 'em back with clubbed guns.

UP they come, pore devils. They ain't fightin' fer liberty, ner love, ner money, ner their homes. They're fightin' fer marijuana.

"Marijuana por me!" they croak, their eyes white like chiny marbles as they charge up the hill. "Marijuana 'sta bueno por me!" And we puts 'em to sleep with our rifle barrels as they come at us like ravin', killin' maniacs.

You've heered the song, no? Well, if yuh never, yuh shouldn't, fer it's as foul as the breath uh its singers. Now I kin stand by an' listen to good, clean, upstandin' cussin', by some red muzzled cow hand er mule skinner, an' enjoy it. But we ain't got the words in our language tuh translate the words in that song that carries the stench uh a bear hole in early spring.

As the filthy words uh that song, comin' from them crazy loco peons, comes driftin' up in the powder smoke, it's purty sickenin'. Even Nigger Bob,

who's got a stummick like a ostrich bird, tells me later that his appetite left him.

But we're fightin' fer our lives, gun barrels crackin' skulls like coconuts an' no time tuh light a smoke.

I draws back tuh smash in a blood-smeared face with my carbine when it croaks out "Amigo, Amigo!" an' grins sickenin'. It's Pelon that's climbin' over, callin' that he's a friend.

Pelon, who is part Injun, part Mex, an' all devil, blood from head tuh foot, his hide slit like he'd bin through a choppin' machine, his belt foul with fresh scalps. He's bin doin' his fightin' hand tuh hand, down there amongst them that he hates with all the devilish, cold-blooded, bottled-up hate that's shriveled up his half-breed heart.

"Pelon pays his bets, Senor Jess," he snarls, an' th'owin' them bloody chunks uh scalps square at the big sergeant, he crumples up like a rag. He's dead afore I kin put the canteen to his mouth. Hatin' with his last breath, he died like he lived, without a friend. Pelon, the bald one, who hated everything except a hoss. It was Jim Gilbert that covered the bloody body with a tarp, then passed his canteen tuh big Jess who stands there wipin' Yaqui blood from his cheek. One uh them scalps had struck him square in the face, leavin' a red smear that stands out on his grey face like a birthmark. He's sick an' nobody blames him.

Fer the time bein', the fightin's over. I hears Jess cuss when he's took a swaller uh water an' passed the canteen tuh Bert. Fer the fust time, I takes notice that the sun is nigh an hour high.

One uh the boys is dead. Two others has light wounds. Jess's left arm is soggy with blood from a bullet that scraped the bone. Yonder's Nigger Bob, heavin' dead Yaquis over the wall tuh clear a place fer his breakfast fire. The hillside is dotted with wounded men crawlin' back amongst the boulders to the brush below. Them huddled things that don't move is dead 'uns. There's more'n a plenty of 'em, too. Not a single shot busts the quiet uh the mornin' an' we kin hear groans comin' up from amongst the rocks down yonder.

"Marijuana por—" But the song gits choked off by the death rattle in the man's throat. Breakfast? Not fer me.

V

I FELT better when we'd got the place policed up some. But we're savin' water, sabe, an' it's a powder-blacked, blood-spattered bunch that squats there behind the wall, smokin' cigareets that ain't got any taste. The sun hits the litter uh empty shells an' th'ows light into our eyes. A wounded hoss in the corral is makin' a fuss an' it's Cotton Top that risks the Yaqui bullets tuh out the pore critter outa his misery.

"It was Calico," he tells Bert.

I'd uh felt better if the boy had cussed er busted down an' cried over that hoss he loved better'n lots uh men love their wives. But he don't. Jest sets there, a dead cigareet between his teeth, like a man made uh sandstone. Bob shoves a cup uh coffee into his hand an' tells him tuh drink it. Bert does as he's told an' don't even show no sign when the steamin' stuff burns his lips. Fer onct it's a relief when Big Jess Hardy starts talkin' about the war.

He turn tuh Jim Gilbert who's bin listenin' like he always done when Jess talked war.

"I got a belly-full of that man's war," he concluded finally, "An' I got all I want uh this scrap, too." And he wasn't grinnin' when he said it. "Killin' cattle, that's what it is. Cattle."

"Yuh ain't seen nothin' yet," says Jim sorter quiet. "Wait'll we run outa water." An' with that he turns his back on Jess.

"Cattle," says Bert Bingham out loud. "I reckon yo're right, Jess. We brung it on ourselves. I'm willin' tuh call it a day."

Which goes fer us all, but we ain't got no say-so in the matter. It's up tuh Mister El Toro, settin' in the shade somewheres down below with his belly full uh chili beans an' tequila. El Toro, whose name is Juan Herrera an' who has enough American sabe an' Injun patience tuh keep settin' there till our tongues swell up an' git black fer lack uh water. Jim's shore right. We ain't seen nothin' yet.

"Man comin' up the hill with a white rag on a stick. No, it ain't a man, it's a woman. Woman with a white rag on a stick."

Jim's on his feet, wavin' a white rag. El Toro's sendin' a message uh some kind. We waits, anxious, while our cigareets goes out. All except Jim Gilbert's. He's smilin' soft like, watchin' that white flag that's comin' up the hill so danged slow. Reckon the woman thinks she's li'ble tuh git shot any second. Pore ignerant devil. She's shakin' like she's took with a chill when me'n Jim lift her over the wall.

"Don't be scairt," Jim tells her in Mex. "We ain't hurtin' yuh." An' he talks to her till she quiets down.

"Now, what does El Toro want?" asks Jim, talkin' easy so's not tuh scare her.

"EL TORO says," she tells Jim, "that if you will surrender to him a man named Sergeant Jess Hardy he will take his soldiers and go away."

Jim turns tuh Jess, smilin' that quiet smile uh his. Every man there is watchin' Jess Hardy's face. Red, then white, then red again except aroun' his nostrils an' the corners uh his mouth.

"Well, Sergeant," says Jim Gilbert, like he was askin' the time uh day, "how about it?"

"Looky here, Jim," I cuts in. "I don't give a—"

He whirls on me like a snappin' wolf. "I'm in command here. Don't let it slip yore memory." And he turns again tuh Jess.

"I'm waitin' yore answer, Sergeant."

"You got it, Captain," says Jess, an' the grin comes back to his lips as he ignores Jim an' speaks to the woman in Mex.

"Tell El Toro that Sergeant Jess Hardy will surrender to him whenever Captain Jim Gilbert sees fit tuh let him go. Tell El Toro for me that he is a sneakin', gutless coward an' it will be my greatest pleasure tuh show him how a real soldier kin die. You'll tell him them exact words?"

"Si, senior."

"Satisfied, Captain Gilbert?" says Jess, sneerin' like.

"Perfectly," says Gilbert. "You may go now, senora. Be sure to get the message right. Also, for me, Captain Gilbert, tell El Toro this. That when a white flag shows from the wall, Sergeant Jess Hardy will be on his way down." He bows. Then as the woman starts away, he calls to her.

"One minute, senora." He turns tuh Jess.

"Yuh know," he's still speakin' Mex, "yuh know what surrender to El Toro means, Sergeant? Not a firin' squad. Nothin' so merciful. It'll be slow torture. I don't want tuh be unfair, yuh sabe?"

"Thanks," grins Jess, rollin' a smoke. "I reckon I know what sort uh medicine I got comin'. Let the woman go, she's in a hurry."

"That is all, senora," says Gilbert, bowin' again. "You know what to tell El Toro?"

"Si, si," she calls back as she goes over the wall.

Nobody says a word as she picks her way down the hill, careful as hell tuh keep that dirty white rag in sight.

"Have a match, Sergeant?" Gilbert hands Jess his matchbox.

I notice that the big feller's hands is plumb steddy when he lights the match give him by the man that jest signed what's wuss than Jess's death warrant.

VI

SOMEHOW it didn't surprise me much when this pisano woman brings that message from El Toro. I bin suspectin' suthin' uh the kind. But I didn't like tuh think that Jess Hardy had brung this trouble on us apurpose. He'd come down tuh Chihuahua tuh call El Toro's bluff, thinkin', like the dang fool he was, that it'd be a man tuh man scrap an' jest the two of 'em swappin' bullets.

Jess has made a mistake, that's all. A bad un, fer shore, but he never done it deliberate. Comin' right down to it, he's bin the cause uh three good men bein' killed, he's th'owed haywire into our cattle gatherin' an' I stand tuh git fired if I git back. Not that I gives a damn about the job fer I done made

up my mind last evenin' that I've turned my last cow in Chihuahua fer a hundred a month an' ca'tridges. But what I'm gittin' at, is this. Jess, with his pers'nal feud with this El Toro, has brung this on us, an' nacherally, we ain't none of us thankin' him fer so doin'.

But by the long-named, eternal an' everlastin' snow-hatted mountains uh Greenland's pinnacles, we're white men an' we ain't givin' that boy up tuh no torturin' Yaqui devils. Not by a brown jugfull, we ain't.

"Have yuh gone loco, Jim Gilbert?" says I.

"Hope not, Buck," he tells me.

"Yuh meant what yuh told that squaw? Yuh aim tuh give Jess up tuh that Yaqui?"

"Why not?" says Jim. "I leave it tuh Jess hiss'f if I ain't doin' the right thing by you boys. You know what this place'll be twenty-four hours from now. A sun blisterin,' waterless hell, Buck."

"I'd ruther go through it an' die at the end, like a man orter, than tuh buy my life like you aim tuh do."

"Mista Buck's sho' right," Nigger Bob puts in. "Us is white folks, Cap'n Gilbert." An' nobody even grins, fer we knows that Bob ain't talkin' about the color of a man's hide.

"Well," says Gilbert, quiet an' calm as a Sunday shirt, "it's still up tuh Jess Hardy tuh take it er leave it."

"She goes as she lays an' you know it, yuh damn slacker!" says Jess. "Don't think fer a cockeyed minute that I'd do anything else, *Captain* Gilbert."

"Captain Gilbert," I tells Jess, "ain't speakin' fer the rest of us. You ain't goin' nowheres, son. How about it, boys?"

"All damn foolishness," says Bert. "If Jess goes, we all go with him. We goes a fightin', too. Captain be damned, we ain't needin' nobody tuh learn us fightin' manners."

"Boys," says Jess, "yuh don't think I cud stay as long as there was a chance uh any more boys bein' killed on my account? El Toro gits his chanct at me. Gilbert is plumb right. I can't stay here now. Not now. Knowin' what I know, I'd be shore low down tuh do it. My big mouthed bullyin' got you boys into this tight. I'm takin' the only way uh gittin' yuh out."

Seein' he feels like that about it, an' knowin' that nothin' kin keep that big boy from doin' what he aims tuh, I tackles the job from another side.

"Suppose yuh do go down there an' give yorese'f up? Do yuh think fer one second that this El Toro half-breed is gonna keep his end uh the bargain? Not while he's got a chance uh wipin' us out. He won't go home with his men. He'll set right there till he starves us out. We'll be losers one good fightin' man an' wuss off than we are now. That drunken Injun ain't keepin' no bargain with nobody."

"Oh, yes, he will," grins Gilbert. Damned if I ain't gittin' sick every time that feller grins.

"What makes yuh think so?" I can't he'p askin'.

"I'm goin' along with Jess Hardy tuh see that El Toro plays the game on the square."

"Now I know yo're loco. Crazy as hell, Gilbert," I busts out.

Gilbert, with a pair uh binoculars, has bin watchin' the mesa down below, off an' on since the fightin' has quit. Now he hands the glasses over tuh me, careful like.

"The one in white clothes, ridin' a bay hoss," he says. "Yuh can't miss him. Only clean 'un in the outfit. See what yuh make uh him.

The glasses ain't quite focused fer my eyes an' it takes mebbyso half a minute afore I spots the man in white clothes. I almost drops the glasses. I'm that shocked. For jest as I looks, the gent in white drill ridin' britches an' coat takes off his hat. It's a white man. Blonde as a Swede with one uh these hides that gits red an' peels but never gits brown. He's a big brute an' near as I kin tell, a ugly lookin' hombre with pig eyes.

I lowers the glasses an' turns tuh Jim who is smilin' with his mouth, his eyes colder'n a winter mornin'.

"Know him, Buck?" he asks me.

"Never seen him till now. No, why should I know a big white skunk that lives with Injuns?"

"Yuh should know him, though. Yuh

really should know the feller, Buck. Fact is, Buck, I'm gonna make arrangements fer yuh to see him right close. Mebby talk with him. Hard man tuh talk to, Buck. Devilish hard. I bin tryin' tuh corner him fer quite a spell. An' even then, onless yuh sabe German talk, yuh'll not git far with him."

"What the hell yuh drivin' at? Who is that man?"

"That man," says Jim Gilbert, "is Colonel Joe Heitmann."

"Good gosh, man. yo're loco!" I snorts. "Heitmann's dead. I seen the body with my own eyes. Went tuh Agua Negro a-purpose tuh make sure. Got the story uh his execution from the Federal captain hisse'f."

"Uh huh," agrees Gilbert, takin' the glasses outa my hands onct more an' as if he's fergot what we're talkin' about, he sights them binoculars onct more. Grinnin' still, he hands 'em over agin.

"He needs a shave an' his purty clothes is kinda mussed up, Buck," says he, "but I think you'll recognize him."

"Who?" says I, takin' the glasses.

"Captain Aluino Vasquez, once of the Federal army. Him that told yuh how Joe Heitmann died so brave."

JIM GILBERT was right. It's the same gent, fer that he ain't lookin' quite so chipper. Him an' Heitmann is talkin' together like they was excited. Now an' then one of 'em points up our direction. Then a third 'un joins 'em. Middle sized jasper in what was onct a United States Army O. D. uniform. I makes a guess that this gent is El Toro. All three of 'em yippy yappin' an' pointin' now. Fer the fust time I takes notice uh the woman, still packin' her white rag on a stick, standin' alongside 'em.

"They're havin' a medicine talk," grins Jim Gilbert. "All three of 'em, by this time, Buck?"

"All three," says I.

"There was a dead Yaqui layin' jest outside the wall where yo're standin', Buck," says Gilbert. "Would yuh mind seein' if he's still there?"

Kinda dazed like, I looks. Now I had seen that dead feller layin' there covered with blood, face down amongst the rocks, when we he'ped that squaw over the wall. But so he'p me Hiram, he's gone now. Plumb vanished. Jim Gilbert points tuh what looks like another dead 'un.

He's layin' between two granite boulders, head down an' kinda in a ball, about half way down the hill.

"Watch," says Jim, pickin' up a rifle. He sights quick an' pulls the trigger. A puff uh dust comes from the granite boulder. Jim jerks the Winchester lever an' another puff uh dust kicks over that corpse that now jumps on his laigs an' runs hell bent down the hill, Jim's bullets th'owin' granite chips at him every jump.

"When he gits down with his earful uh news, they'll shore pow-wow plenty more."

"It may be danged smart an' all that, Jim Gilbert," I growls, somehow gittin' the idee that he's bin makin' damn fools uh all of us, "but it's low down. Onct or twict I've had danged good reason tuh think you was some way mixed up with that El Toro. I ain't so dad gummed sure uh not bein' right in that guess. You know them gents down there a leetle too good, tuh be a honest man."

"I thought you knew I soldiered with Joe Heitmann?" says he.

"If that big bald faced gent down there is Joe Heitmann, who was it that got shot by this Vasquez firin' squad in Agua Negro?" I barks.

"His name was Warren Tully," says Gilbert, "but there's few men in Mexico that ever knew he had any name except me an' the jefe an' Joe Heitmann, an' none of us ever took the trouble tuh see if it was his real name. I don't even know where he come from, Buck, ner why he left there. Didn't give a hang. That was his business. You know how it is.

"IT was in 1911 that he hit my ranch. I had a ranch in this flea bit country then. Not more'n half a day's ride from where we sit. Fifty year lease, a nice bunch uh white face cows, an' a few steel dust hosses that was fit mounts fer any man. Me'n another cow hand was pardners.

"Funny part of it was, gents, I was honest them days. My neighbors, all

Mexicans, was darn fine folks, too. We was doin' fine, me an' my pard, bankin' a little money an' workin' hard. We trail a bunch uh yearlin's tuh El Paso an' I stays there tuh sell 'em. Got top price fer them yearlin's an' rides back from El Paso feelin' like a king. But that feelin' don't last long. I finds our little ranch burned to the ground. In front uh the ashes is my pardner layin' with a empty six-shooter in his hand, riddled with bullets. He's got five Mexicans. One fer each ca'tridge.

"That's in the evenin'. I buries my pard by moonlight an' early next mornin' I takes a look aroun'. Our hosses is stole. There's dead cattle layin' all over the range, killed wanton by that rebel outfit. My neighbors, good class Mexicans, is killed off an' their women stole. Hungry, disgusted, fightin' mad, I rides back tuh what had bin my ranch. There's five hundred pesos buried in a safety box under the ashes an' I'm digging up that money when a horsebacker lopes into sight. I'm hid in some manzanita bushes when he pulls up his hoss by the stockade corral. Then I sees he's a white man an' steps out tuh meet him. But my gun is where I kin git it quick. But I don't need no gun on this feller. He's peaceable. More'n that he's got a bullet hole in his shoulder an' sits his hoss like a drunk man. He tells me his name is Warren Tully.

"Declarin' him in on a new pardnership, I starts onct more in the cow business. But we begins on a different basis. Our home ranch is wherever we spread our beds. Our only law is our guns. We eats brown beans, tortillas, an' maverick beef an' we're brandin' plenty uh cattle.

"Brandin' 'em, sabe, but we ain't sellin' any. Border regulations gits shore strict, an' the inspectors is onery. Them dogies is plenty wild an' me'n Warren is worked tuh hide an' bones every time we gits a herd rounded up. Two men doin' the work uh ten. Hosses leg weary an' feed scarce. We own poco plenty cattle but our bank balance gits lower every week. Can't hire cow hands from acrost the line an' can't trust the Mex vaqueros. We ain't no better off than forty a month cow hands. Fact is, we're wuss off, fer we're dodgin' them hills like coyotes. Rebel armies thicker'n the cattle onct was. We're about ready tuh call off the deal when we meets up with Joe Heitmann.

"He needs a couple uh good white men. Men that kin shoot straight an' handle pisanos. He'll make us each captain an' our wages is plenty big. Likewise he'll pay a big bonus fer runnin' guns an' ammunition acrost the border.

"Up till now, I've kept outa Mexico border politics but me'n Warren is desperate. More'n that, I've had a bad deal down here. My rights as a Mexico land leaser an' as a United States citizen has bin stomped on plenty. Presidents down here is changin' so fast that yuh don't never know who's a rebel an' who ain't. When I appeals tuh my own country, seems like they ain't got much time tuh waste on me. I ain't got no business bein' down in Mexico, sabe? So when Heitmann propositions me'n Warren Tully, we signs up with him.

"We runs guns, drills them 'dobe soldiers, an' lives good. That's when I meets Pelon.

"Heitmann had sent me into a little town tuh recruit soldiers from the mines. I'm wise enough by now tuh savvy how tuh play their game down here. Crooked? I'm all twisted outa shape by then. An' wiser'n a horned owl. In a year's time I've bribed half the state an' swapped shot with the other half. I pack upwards of a thousand dollars in my money belt an' two guns tuh pertect it. Bodyguards is more dangerous than rurales, I finds out purty early in the game. So I'm all alone when I rides into this little 'dobe town tuh hire soldiers fer Heitmann who is puttin' in most uh his time in El Paso under another name, lettin' me an' Tully do the work.

"I'm ridin' along the street when I hears some Federal officer bark out a command. You know how them fool officers bawl out, Buck. Like a machine gun rattlin'. Hear 'em half a mile off. Comin' so clost, jest the other side of a six-foot adobe wall, it makes me jump. Before he's finished the full command, I've filled both hands with a six-gun apiece. Then I sees the command tuh "Load!" ain't meant fer me. Yonder

side uh the wall, standin' with his back to a buildin' that I takes tuh be the quartel, is a feller in cotton pants an' shirt. He ain't blindfolded an' I kin see he's standin' straight as he faces that firin' squad.

"I gits a quick idee. Quick thinkin' has got tuh be part uh my business, sabe. Whirlin' my hoss, I runs him at the wall. Mebby he'll clear it. Most mebby he won't. Anyhow, it's worth a try. I hear his back hoofs click as we goes over like a man divin' off a springboard.

"The firin' squad an' the lousy little officer in command has their backs to me. It's like swipin' marbles off a kid. As my hoss jumps past mister officer, I lays him down tuh sleep with my gun barrel, rides through them ragged peon soldiers, an' grabs up the prisoner. I'm around the corner an' outa sight afore they know what's happened. That's the way I meets up with Pelon, fer it's him that I picked up. When me'n him leaves there next mornin' we've recruited the hull danged army, includin' the officer, an' all that's left in the town is some old men an' women an' kids who is trailin' behind hollerin' 'Viva.'

"An' that's the way things went fer a while. Heitmann in El Paso. Tully runnin' guns, me recruitin' troops. Then this big Joe Heitmann shows up at daybreak one mornin' lookin' like he's seen a ghost. He's covered with dried mud an' some blood spattered. Suthin', it seems like, has went wrong in El Paso an' Mister Heitmann ain't no longer welcome in the United States. He ain't sayin' what has gone haywire an' I don't know till some time later that the United States had declared war an' they've tried tuh th'ow Heitmann in prison fer a spy.

"Yuh see we don't git no news down here in the hills. Jest rumors that nobody with sense takes stock in. Tully an' me has bin separated fer months. Yeah, Heitmann was foxy. Foxy as hell. Tully was hearin' things an' Heitmann didn't aim that me'n him should git together tuh talk things over. He had men interceptin' any letters Tully wrote me. I finds that out later, along with a lot uh other stuff.

"'Captain Gilbert,' says Heitmann, 'you will take what men we have an' move south to Black Mesa where you will establish permanent camp. Git fer me the best horse you have an' ten good fighters, for bodyguard. There are some schweinhunds who would like to bump off your Colonel Joe Heitmann, vershtein sic?' And he cusses in German for ten minutes without stoppin'.

"I picks him a good hoss an' a bodyguard. Damn him, if I'd knowed then what he was up to, I'd uh killed him in his tracks. Seems like, back in that short roached head uh hisn, he'd always kep' that idee. Sorter hole card, sabe?

"Fer build an' colorin', Heitmann an' Warren Tully is about the same. Both big, blonde headed. Few men in Mexico knew Joe Heitmann when they seen him. Likewise, because uh his line uh business. Tully has kept purty much under cover. Which is jest duck soup fer Joe Heitmann.

"He's wanted in the United States fer a spy. The Mexican gover'ment has put a big price on his head because they know he's a revolutionist. Git the idee, Buck? If Joe Heitmann kin convince both gover'ments that he's *dead*, he's safe tuh carry on with his business down here. A business that's got beyond border politics by this time, though I'm too danged lumb tuh see it at the time. Heitmann, the big cheese, has a bigger game than me er Warren Tully ever suspected. But that ain't what I want tuh tell yuh now.

"Heitmann wants tuh play dead. By plumb accident, Warren Tully has played into his hand. Fer one uh Heitmann's spies has intercepted a letter from Tully tellin' me that the United States has declared war an' we'd orter go on up tuh Douglas an' join up. He wants me tuh meet him at a water hole north uh Agua Negro. We'll go together from there, back to the States where we belong."

JIM GILBERT quit talkin' fer a minute an' stares hard at the ground. Nobody says a word. Then Jim goes on with his story.

"So I done as Heitmann said. I took our rag-tag army tuh that Black Mesa

yonder. Heitmann, the dirty skunk, meets Tully at the water hole. One uh them low down pisanos slips up an' cracks him on the head as he's sleepin'. He wakes up a prisoner at Agua Negro.

"On his clothes is papers that identifies him as Joe Heitmann. The Mexican that brung him in is wearin' a rurale's uniform. Heitmann, uh course, don't show up at all in the town. Leastways, not then. An' all that time I'm settin' on Black Mesa not even knowin' that my country is belly deep in the big war. Comical, eh?" An' Jim Gilbert's laugh makes me shiver, although the sun is blazin' hot.

"So that's how Warren Tully gits shot fer Joe Heitmann an' the low-lived rebel lieutenant that turned him over tuh the Federal officer, Aluino Vasquez, who sees himse'f being promoted fer that execution. Oh, yeah, Vasquez figgered he was killin' Heitmann. Why not? An' he splits the reward money with this damned Mexican.

"But Heitmann ain't satisfied with that. He wants me put outa the way now. Scared I'll kill him when I find out about Tully. So he makes the big mistake uh hirin' Pelon tuh do the job. Gives him a hundred pesos tuh stick a knife in my back. Pelon takes the money then tells me about it.

"But Heitmann's hid out on me. Foxy? I'll tell a man. I chokes the story uh Tully's murder outa one uh them bodyguard jaspers, then rides tuh Agua Negro. I'm after that lieutenant that turned Tully over to the Federal officer. I found him. Shot him down like he was a mad dog, then rode north acrost the border. It was then that Joe Heitmann come tuh Agua Negro, told Aluino Vasquez that he'd made the hell of a bad mistake of killin' a United States citizen in good standin', an' scared this same Vasquez into joinin' him in his conquest uh Mexico. That musta bin about a week after you was in Agua Negro, Buck. Too bad yuh didn't stay there a few days longer.

"So I goes tuh Douglas to join up with a real army an' see the war folks is talkin' about. But it seems like I'm kinda late. I bin notified tuh register fer the draft an' ain't done it. I'm posted as a slacker. Likewise there's some nasty talk goin' on about Heitmann an' them that was connected with Heitmann. I'm th'owed in jail fer dodgin' the draft. If I began talkin', they'll connect me up with Heitmann an' my name will be plain mud. Yella mud at that. So that's why I busted jail that night, stole a hoss, an' come back into Mexico.

"I didn't give a damn much what happened to me. I wanted tuh git my hands on Joe Heitmann's neck afore I died. But it was like gettin' at a man behind a stone wall. He kept hisse'f surrounded with men that'd shoot me on sight. They captured me finally an' had me stripped fer torture. But they should uh knowed I had friends in that outfit. One of 'em cut me loose an' give me a six-shooter an' a pair uh pants. I got shoes an' shirt offen the first 'un that tried tuh stop me.

"But I like tuh died afore I got to the hacienda of a friend. Some kind uh fever, sabe? I'd been standin' naked in broilin' sun, from sun-up till dark, every day fer five days. My skin come off in long strips. An' only enough water an' grub tuh keep me alive so's I cud feel the pain uh the burnin' Heitmann settin' in the shade smokin' cigars an' callin' me all the names he cud lay his dirty tongue to. Yeah, I reckon it was some sorter fever. Anyhow I was outa my head fer a long spell. Then I was too weak tuh move. Them Mexican folks treated me like a son. Riskin' their lives every minute I stayed there, too. There's good an' bad in every race. Them was good Mexican people. They're in El Paso now.

"I made 'em take what money I had in the bank. More they'd ever dreamed uh havin'. They cried all over the place when I left El Paso tuh come back here after Heitmann. They'd had quite a time gittin' me tuh El Paso an' I felt kinda low down comin' back here. But I wanted Joe Heitmann. I'd jest come back from a trip plumb all over the state when I met you at the saloon in Juarez, Buck. I come along with yuh to find Joe Heitmann. Yonder he is an' I cud pick him off from here. But I'm takin'

him back alive, boys. Takin' him tuh Douglas where my name is posted as a damned slacker."

An' with that he grins at us, his eyes glitterin' like a wolf's.

"Heitmann's army all quit him, fellers," he tells us. "Him an' Vasquez is th'owin' in with this El Toro fer safety. Jess, this is yore scrap an' mine. You an' me, when the times comes, is goin' down there an' settle our private affairs like we orter. Buck an' these boys kin go right ahead now an' gather their cattle without bein' bothered by Yaquis er Mexican bandits. You an' me, Jess. Is it a go?"

"Shake, yuh damned slacker!" grins Jess, an' it ain't hard tuh tell that Jess Hardy ain't tho'win' out no insults when he calls Jim a slacker. When they lets go hands, they're pardners.

VII

WHILE me an' Jim an' Jess takes turns watchin' the pow-wowin' below, the boys buries Pelon an' the white boy.

The sun's gittin' higher an' hotter. By goin' easy on the water, givin' the bulk of it tuh them that's got wounds, we kin make the supply last till evenin'. Nobody complains ner cusses their luck. They joshes one another an' Nigger Bob drags out a mouth harp an' gits some tunes outa it.

"Boys," says Jim, handin' the glasses tuh Jess, "looks like my plans was workin'. While a man can't tell what them three jaspers is sayin', they act like they figgered Christmas was comin'. Heitmann, yuh sabe, figgers I'm walkin' into his trap. He don't know that Pelon tipped me off that him an' Vasquez was with El Toro. He's waitin' fer me like a spider waitin' fer a fly tuh walk into his web. El Toro is waitin' the same way for Jess. Yep, we got 'em in a shore sweet temper. That "dead" feller that laid by the wall pickin' up what news we'd spill when the squaw left, will tell 'em how Jess is gonna give hisse'f up an' I'm goin' along tuh see that El Toro carries out his end uh the deal. Uh course, this El Toro, jest exactly like Buck says, don't noways figger on playin' the game on the square.

"Then what's the sense, Jim Gilbert, in you two boys goin' down there? I asks.

"We're goin' down, Buck, tuh settle our arguments with them two men that we come down here tuh find."

"Hell of a way yuh take tuh do it, son. Givin' yourselves up," I tells him.

"Nobody's givin' up nothin', Buck," he grins. "That's where the ketch is. That talk I made about Jes givin' hisse'f up, was jest a stall. With that feller layin' by the wall, listenin', it was the only thing tuh do, sabbe. I never meant a word of it, darn yuh."

An' he sits back chucklin' while me an' Jess an' the boys cusses him out a plenty fer trickin' us thataway.

"They'll be off their guard now," Jim explains. "Directly they'll be sendin' up another white flag tuh hold a medicine talk."

Jim is right. There's the squaw with the white rag comin' up the hill onct more. We lets her come, leavin' it tuh Jim tuh do the necessary talkin' with her.

"Well, señora," says Jim, smilin' easy, "what is it this time?"

"If the Señor Jim Gilbert will meet El Toro at the big rock where I shall leave the white flag on the way down, then he will make the arrangements for surrending the Señor Jess Hardy an' moving away all his army."

"'Sta bueno, señora, I will meet your El Toro at the rock," says Jim. An' bows stiff as a undertaker layin' out a corpse.

An' holdin' a white rag high, he climbs over the wall an' walks down the hill, a cigareet in the corner uh his mouth. Every man there, in spite uh what Jim has told us about El Toro wantin' Jess, knows that Jim Gilbert's life ain't worth a 'dobe dollar. We're all at our guns, watchin' clost. When I tries tuh locate this Joe Heitmann with the glasses, he ain't nowhere in sight. Worried, I watches that white flag that's comin' up the hill tuh meet Jim. It's this El Toro feller, all right. Jess identifies him, too.

We sees Jim an' this El Toro makin' motions with their arms as they talk.

Bimeby they don't wave so many hands aroun' an' each of 'em rolls a smoke. When they lights off the same match I knows they've about come tuh some decision. They talks some more, then salute an' Jim comes on up the hill. El Toro don't lose no time gettin' back tuh his camp, but Jim seems to jest crawl up the slope. That's the way it seems tuh us fellers that's watchin', anyhow. But it's a heap easier goin' down a hill than it is tuh climb up. When he climbs over the wall, he's grinnin' like a bartender at a wine buyin' prospector.

"El Toro," he tells us, "is orderin' his men tuh move camp. Things is goin' nice, Buck."

"Jest what do yuh mean, nice?" says I.

"He's takin' his men into that box canyon yonder. Every man, hoss, woman an' kid in the outfit. All except him an' Joe Heitmann an' Vasquez is tuh ride in there. We kin see from here that they all go. It's gonna be a shore awful jolt tuh Heitmann, knowin' I've found out he's with El Toro," Jim chuckles, then mumbles some cuss word as he can't find his smokin'. "I musta let that damn Yaqui git off with my last sack. Hell."

"Take mine." I hands him a sack uh terbaccer, impatient as the devil.

Right then, I wouldn't uh put it past that dang fool tuh walk on down there after that sack uh smokin'. Seems like he's more worried about losin' that sack uh Durham than he is about gittin' killed.

"Here's a match," I snaps, short like. "Light up an' spill the rest uh the plan." He grins through the smoke an' nods.

"When El Toro has herded his men into yonder canyon, we will meet him an' Heitmann an' Vasquez at the rock yonder. Vasquez will take charge uh me'n Jess. Heitmann an' El Toro will go with you boys. When you've gone, say, ten miles, El Toro an' Heitmann will come back tuh torture me'n Jess, sabe? But so long as them two gents is with you boys, you'll have the drop on 'em. That's fer a sorter guarantee that yuh'll not be shot at while yo're gittin' outa here. I'm swappin' Jess fer Heitmann, git the idea, an' each of us goes to the other's outfit tuh see that all goes as is agreed."

"Is that all?" I asks, sarcastic. "Is that all there is tuh this idee uh yourn?"

"Not quite all, Buck," grins Jim. "When you boys has gone beyond yellin' an' rifle distance, I want yuh to take Joe Heitmann an' this El Toro pris'ner. It'll be easy enough, won't it, Buck?"

"Bein' as we outnumber Heitmann an' this El Toro gent about three tuh one, I reckon that cud be arranged," I growls. "But it don't look tuh me like that'd be he'pin' you an' Jess any. You two boys'll be corralled in that canyon with them Yaquis."

"Don't worry none about that, Buck," says Jim, grinnin' an' winkin'. "I got a joker fer a hole card, pardner. Me'n Jess'll be ketchin' up tuh you boys about dark. Make camp at the 'dobe corrals on the Verde, about twenty-five miles north uh here. Know where I mean? Good. Me'n Jess'll be along about moonrise."

VIII

I AIN'T likely tuh fergit that mornin' as we rode down that rocky hill, our hosses snortin' an' shyin' off from the dead bodies tuh them Yaquis that lay like barley sacks in the sun.

Jess an' Jim in the lead, the rest of us follerin', all of us play-actin' parts like Jim told us. We was supposed tuh be shore ringy at Jim fer givin' Jess up, sabe? Yet, kinda glad tuh save our skins. Like Jim told us, Heitmann an' El Toro 'ud sabe better if we seemed half glad we was gittin' off so easy.

Back in the canyon was El Toro's ragged army, hid from sight by the steep canyon walls that nothin' but a bird cud climb. Bottled up there with Vasquez at the narrow mouth, keepin' 'em in there. Not that they could uh done much, if they did start out. We was all better mounted. All except Jess an' Jim who, accordin' tuh agreement, left their hosses at the rock an' with their hands in the air, walked up the wash tuh where Heitmann an' El Toro waited.

But if Jim Gilbert is scairt any, he

(*continued on page* 117)

DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."

The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

"There is in all men a sleeping giant of mindpower," he says. "When awakened, it can make man capable of surprising feats, from the prolonging of youth to success in many other worthy endeavors." The system is said by many to promote improvement in health; others tell of increased bodily strength, courage and poise.

"The time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world," declares the author, and offers to send his amazing 9000 word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 91L, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

shore hides it good, fer he grins up at this big Heitmann like he ain't got a care in the world.

"Vie gehts, yuh big stiff," Jim calls out, "thought the buzzards had yuh by now.

"Schweinhund!" says Heitmann, his red face kinda mottled with white spots.

He's scairt uh Jim, that's plain, but he feels like he's holdin' the winnin' hand an' his grin is shore nasty. Then Vasquez rides up an' takes charge uh the two pris'ners who unbuckles their gun belts an' lets 'em drop in the sand. I sees Jim toss away the gun in his shoulder scabbard too. I looks at Jess who now stands there, shet uh his guns. His face is the color uh fresh putty. No two ways to it, Jess Hardy's scairt.

Heitmann an El Toro rides up an' salutes but I ain't returnin' no damned would-be murderer's salute. Not Buck Bell. Not if I'm shot down on the spot. Which I won't be fer my right hand stays shore clost tuh my gun.

"It is my great pleasure, señors," says this two-bit Injun in dirty uniform, "to escort you to safety."

"Then git goin'," I growls at him. "An' keep that big pole cat in the white pants tuh windward. Bob, keep a eye on the big Injun lovin' son of a prairie dog owl."

An' we goes yonderly. Lookin' over my shoulder, I sees Jess standin' there, watchin' us as we drop over the ridge outa sight. He stands fer all the world like a man that's about tuh be hung. Jim waves his hat by way of sayin' good-bye an' while we're some distance off, I thinks I see him grin. We stops long enough tuh water our hosses an' fill the canteens. Then, me an' El Toro in the lead, we hits the trail at a long trot.

WE'RE safe enough now, but somehow I feel like a sheep killin' dog. Jim's cocksureness don't seem tuh lighten the burden none. I tries tuh see it from Jim's viewpoint. He's bin all over that country. Like as not a lot uh them Yaquis served under him. Them Injuns shore does admire a brave man an' Jim has hinted more than once to us that he's

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got a tremendous scheme under his hat.

Mebbyso he aims tuh talk hisse'f an' Jess outa the tight. I make up my mind then an' there that if them two boys is killed, I'll get a bunch uh white men an' clean them hills right. By now we're outa shoutin' an' rifle range an' givin' Nigger Bob the signal, we proceeds tuh vi'late our truce. Jammin' our six-shooter barrels under the ribs uh them two blackbirds, we talks to 'em in good, plain, easy understood American. They sees our side uh the question, an' their paws goes up tuh grab air.

"You have bust the truce," sputters this El Toro party. "For this, that Jess Hardy shall die the hell of a slow death. Also the Captain Jeem Gilbert will be tied naked on the ant hill."

Jim tells me tuh be sure them pris'ners has their arms up all the way acrost the two mile stretch uh open sand that lays ahead on the trail. He tells me he'll be watchin' our party with the glasses. Part uh his plan, he says. So, while it nigh ruins the arms uh them two rebels, I sees to it that they does so. It's no trick fer weak arms, holdin' 'em up like that fer half a hour. Follerin' Jim's instructions, I makes the two pris'ners ride about ten foot ahead uh us, their hands reachin' fer sky holts. Then we passes the open stretch an' keeps on at a faster gait. It's sundown when we makes camp at the 'dobe corrals on the Verde.

"Where you takin' us?" says this Heitmann who kin talk plenty good when he's a mind to.

"We camps here, feller, till Jim Gilbert gits here. Jim 'lows you an' him has got a important date with some U. S. gover'ment men yon side uh the border."

Well, he squeals like a pig, bawls like a branded calf, tries beggin' an' bribin' an' says if we give him the chanct, he'll save Jim an' Jess from the torture they got comin'. He says that El Toro was aimin' tuh kill both them boys. Likewise he says they'll be killed if him an' El Toro ain't back by dark.

I finally shoves a glove in his mouth tuh close him up. I'm gittin' onery an'

worried about Jim an' Jess. Leavin' Heitmann, I goes over tuh pow-wow with this El Toro hombre who is lyin' under guard by a hackberry tree. He ain't said a word for hours. Jest swole up an' sullen, his black eyes spittin' hate at us. He has plenty nerve, this Yaqui, an' when his time comes, he'll go out game. Somehow, I dunno why, I feels kinda sorry fer the pore devil. I gives him a smoke an' a drink uh water an' sets down when I've undid his arm ropes.

"Now, mister," I says, friendly enough, "lemme git yore side uh this argument. There's bin a heap uh yore men killed an' we can't bring 'em tuh life. But I dunno as that's any reason why any more men orter be shot down. Tell me about that war acrost yonder an' how you an' Jess Hardy got tuh be sech bad friends. If Jess an' Jim gits back here alive, an' if I think yuh got the wust uh that deal acrost the ocean, I'll see that Jess ner nobody else will hurt yuh."

His eyes bores into me like two black spots uh fire. There's hate in 'em but likewise there's suthin' else. He looks like a vicious dog that's bin beat with a club, whupped till he can't fight no more, but not whimperin' none. A dog that mighta amounted tuh suthin' if he'd bin treated differ'nt.

THEN he uncorks what's bin bottled up inside him fer months. He talks in American sometimes, but mostly in Mex which I sabe plenty. He tells me how he was drafted into a war he didn't know nothin' about. Sent over on a big boat. Seasick all the way. Then shoved on up to the trenches. It was hell fer him, I reckon. He turned kinda green as he told me about the big guns an' the noise an' the gas an' so on. When he tried tuh slip off an' go back, Jess Hardy, his sergeant, kicked him back into the fight. He said he screamed, he was so scairt. Takes a heap tuh make a Yaqui scream.

I give him a drink uh tequila I'd taken offen Heitmann. It kinda put the blood back in him an' he goes on.

"That, señor, is why I say to myself

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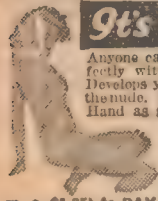

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that I shall die quick an' make the end to it. So I jump up an' run, not back, but ahead, where those Germans are. I am so scare that I do not feel it when their bullets hit me. I have no gun. Just a long knife that I steal from the cook to someday kill that Sergeant Hardy with when he turn his back.

"There are men in that trench ditch into which I fall. Men in grey uniforms the color of the mud an' their faces. When they come at me, I forget the thunder. Por Dios, to fight like this is something that a Yaqui sabes. When one is quick, señor, it is not so hard to stick a knife into those who have so little room to use a bayonet on a gun.

"Some had knives, like me, señor. But diablo, they are clumsy with the knife, those Germans soldiers. When the officer, whose Luger jams, goes down with my knife between his ribs, those others do not want any more of it. But even as those others, who work the machine gun, cry that "Kamerad," one of those thunder shells hits right there. When I open the eyes the next time. I am in a hospital. Someone tell me that the gringo war is over. There is no more thunder. But it is many weeks before they put me with some more hombres an' send me home."

He fishes down into the pocket uh that greasy army blouse an' pulls out a hunk uh soiled ribbon with the Croix de Guerre hung on it.

"This, señor, they give me to help me remember about that gringo war."

"Did Jess Hardy ever see this?" I asks him. He shakes his head, his black eyes burnin' onct more.

"No. He think that I run back, not ahead, that day. When the doctor tell me about the gas in my lung an' send me to Camp Kearny, I run away from that hospital an' come to El Paso where I think I might find that sergeant who call me the dog with a yellow belly. In Juarez I find him an' tell him he is scare to come to the hills an' fight. Then I go out of that town quick before some rurale see me an' shoot me for a revolutionist.

"Only for you, I should now be back

there with my men, showing that Sergeant Jess Hardy this paper which is sign by General Pershing an' which say that Juan Herrera is not the dog with that yellow belly. For each kick that Jess Hardy has give me, I should give him one in the pants. I should call him each of those names he say I am. An' when I show him I am not scare to stand with him an' fight with the knife, an' cut him till he yells, then I would have the squaws whip him back home with quirts."

"Yuh mean," says I, "that all this killin' has bin fer that? That yuh jest wanted tuh show Jess Hardy yuh wan't a coward, then send him home?" Dang me if I cud believe it, yet I knowed Injuns, too.

"Si," he snarls at me "that is all. By now, that Vasquez has kill him an' that Captain Jim Gilbert who is the brave man an' does not talk loud."

"Heitmann would uh killed Jim Gilbert," I says, beginnin' tuh think this Yaqui wan't the only fool livin'.

Why the hell hadn't we talked tuh this El Toro before an' let him show his cross tuh Jess?

El Toro shrugs his shoulders.

"I did not know about the señor. That Señor Heitmann is perhaps one of those cursed dogs with that yellow belly?"

"Yuh guessed it, son," I tells him, takin' a squint at the sky.

IT'LL be a hour till moonrise. I takes a drink uh that tequila tuh quiet me down, but it don't. Reachin' over, I cuts El Toro's foot ropes.

"Come on, feller," I tells him. "Me'n you is gonna kill two good hosses gittin' back as fast as we kin to where we come from."

"What's wrong, Mistah Buck?" calls Bob, fussin' over his dutch ovens.

"Everything," I tells the whole bunch. "Me'n El Toro's goin' back. There ain't gonna be no shootin' neither. Like as not, Jim an' Jess is both dead an' all because none of us has got the sense of a horny toad. Jim Gilbert lied tuh us, boys, shore as—"

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rim uh firelight comes that Jim Gilbert hiss'f.

"Keep yore shirts on, Buck, she's a cool evenin'," he calls.

Then, grinnin' kinda tired like, he says, "Caballeros!" greetin' us after the Mex custom.

"Where's Jess?" I asks, not seein' him with Jim.

"Right here, skipper," calls Jess, comin' up outa the dark. "Come on, Vasquez, yuh won't git bit."

An' Aluino Vasquez lets his hoss come into the firelight.

"Grub ready, Buck?" asks Jim, sniffin'. "I cud eat a raw buzzard." An' while we're all dyin' from curiosity, somethin' in the way Jim an' Jess acts, keeps our mouths shet.

IX

I RECKON that, comin' right down tuh cases, the only fit judge uh that thing we calls nerve, is the Big Boss up yonder.

Leastaways settin' there in the moonlight, smokin' of a after supper cigareet, I comes tuh that conclusion. Funny, ain't it, how differ'nt everything looks to a man, come night. There we sits, the light of our campfire th'owin' shadders acrost the faces uh the men that sets aroun' squat legged on the ground. Cotton Top. Jim Gilbert, El Toro, Jess, Vasquez, the Mormon punchers, an' the Texicans. Heitmann, his hands free now but Nigger Bob ridin' clost herd on him. Every gent there, even Heitmann, is a brave man in his own way. Pick Heitmann up an' set him down amongst his own kind, with one uh them sabers in his hand, an' I ain't got much doubt but what he'd put up a game fight.

I makes El Toro tell Jess Hardy what he told me. I sees Jess git on his laigs an' shove a big paw toward the Yaqui he'd bin onery too. Jess, a foot an' six inches taller, heavier by eighty pounds, smilin' understandin' like into El Toro's black eyes.

"Put 'er there, buddy," says Jess, "an' call it a day. Mebby yuh don't know it, boy, but yuh showed up a yaller streak today in Jess Hardy.

Then he turns to the rest of us. All

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" 'Take
Vasquez,' says
jump yuh. Yore
we ain't neither o.
look. I bet a hat L
an' Heitmann prisoner.
"Well, Vasquez looks
I sees him change expr
pulled off a mask. He
much when he hands the glas
Jim,
" 'That is most unfortunat
señors,' he tells us. 'I have or
shoot you if your friends act treacher
He cocks his gun like he means business.
But Jim, settin' on a rock, smokin', jest
nods keerless.
" 'One moment Señor Lieutenant,' says Jim. 'Consider this very careful from all sides. Already, you have made one very bad mistake when you killed my pardner, Warren Tully, a citizen of the United States. Do not enlarge upon that one mistake, señor, by wantonly killing two more unarmed citizens of the state of Texas.' "

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jim's got
collects the
He shrugs his
gun.
, señor, to kill two
s he. 'But it is now
me to do otherwise. It
who shall be shot first.
hot, an' will not let you

about tuh let him have the
hem two derringer slugs when
me on the shin. I reckon I was
white an' shakin', fer Jim grins.

One thing more, Señor Vasquez,' says he, kinda kickin' at some sand between his feet, like he's studyin' some problem, 'Did Heitmann not tell you that it was Captain Gilbert who established that base camp on Black Mesa?'

"Vasquez nods, kinda impatient. He's anxious tuh git shet of a nasty job.

"'Did he not speak of some high explosive bombs an' T. N. T. that I had Tully smuggle across the border?' Onct more Vasquez nods, this time with more interest.

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tremely necessary duty to
Yaqui men, women, an' kids,
bits.'

"An' he grabs the handle uh the
But before he can shove down the han-
dle, Vasquez is on his knees, beggin' fer
their lives. He tells Jim tuh shoot him,
er torture him, er do what he damn
pleases, but fer the love he bears his
mother an' the Señor Dios, spare his
people in that box canyon. He says they
are all sick of fighting under El Toro,
that for many days they have begged to
go back to their homes. They will throw
away every gun, every bullet, every
machete, if the Señor Captain Gilbert will

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gasps Jess, pop eyed,
as bluffin'?"
im's grin vanish sudden like.
white an' shakin' like he's took
chill. Horror is writ on his face.
e face of a man that's scairt so bad
his heart's scarce beatin'. Then gradual
like, as we stares at him, the color comes
back into his face. He grins, sheepish,
but his hands still shake some as he rolls
a smoke.

"A danged horned toad run acrost my
hand," he explains. "I know they're
harmless as a frog but when I was a
little shaver, my big brother usta tease
me into spasm by puttin' 'em on me. To
this day, I'm dead scairt uh one of 'em."

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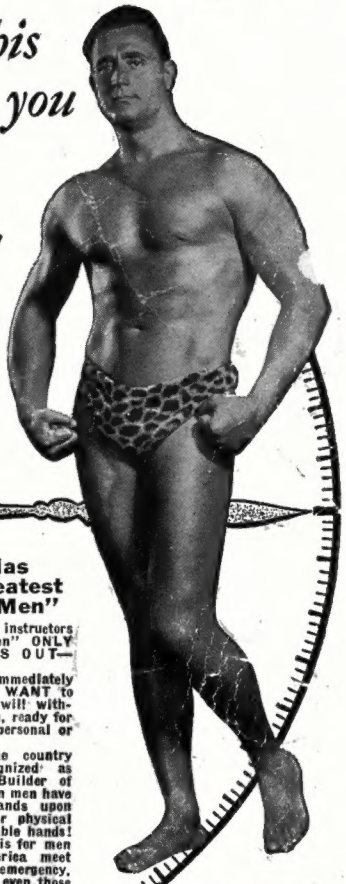

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